

ANDRÉ CELIÈRES

THE
PROSE STYLE OF EMERSON

THÈSE COMPLÉMENTAIRE POUR LE DOCTORAT D'ÉTAT
PRÉSENTÉE A LA FACULTÉ DES LETTRES
DE L'UNIVERSITÉ DE PARIS

PARIS
IMPRESSIONS PIERRE ANDRÉ

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INTRODUCTION

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his own lifetime a great figure in intellectual America, is even in our day considered one of the most outstanding American thinkers. Yet he has left no great work, no impressive monument of literary excellence. Rather do we remember of him some of the best known aphorisms in his land. He has left no definite system of philosophy other than a number of loosely related beliefs still more loosely labelled "transcendentalism," a movement he refused to sponsor and which he did not actually originate.

Whence then the unabating success of this author who wrote no masterpiece, of this philosopher who refused to lead? Would it not be a fair answer to suggest that this success was his because he expressed more aptly than others important thoughts prevalent in his own country and in his own time, because he instilled them with a vigour that has kept them alive for more than a half century. Such an accomplishment denotes strong personality revealing itself in forceful style.

In order to justify this study, we must disclaim any intent at mere academic appraisal. It is undertaken as an attempt to evaluate an actual contribution to the development of the American language as a vehicle of thought and culture. "Emerson and Wordsworth", wrote Matthew Arnold, "have done the most important work in English prose and poetry in the present century".

A style which is good has lasting qualities; its true worth will persistently find favour, for as Emerson himself tells us, "in literature one is ever struck with the fact that the good once is good always".

Cannot we, in 1936, say of Emerson's *Phi Beta Kappa Address*,

of his essay *Nature*, — both literary landmarks of about a century ago, both thought provocative, — that the good once is good always? Dr. Holmes, speaking for the American people, terms the *Phi Beta Kappa Address* “our intellectual Declaration of Independence”. Lowell too, seeing in it that power which destroys and creates, and which is revealed in Emerson’s style, said: “We were socially and intellectually moored to English thought, till Emerson cut the cable and gave us a chance at the dangers and the glories of blue water.”

Emerson’s essay, *Nature*, has been described by Theodore Parker, one of Emerson’s most earnest admirers, as “more defective in form than any of his writings, but rich in beauty, a rare prose poem, a book for one’s bosom”. All of the writer’s philosophy is there condensed in a few paragraphs, and we pronounce it good; its palpable blemishes notwithstanding.

Style at its highest may be considered to have a dual function: through it, we seek to find expression for our best thought in a form entirely satisfying to ourselves; and through style we also seek to have our thoughts understood, and accepted, by the world at large. This implies the releasing of an inner force, a truth significant above all to its creator. It also presupposes art, in the sense of acquired knowledge, as Flaubert would have it; and so has a standard of beauty or model of perfection for guide. “Beauty is truth, truth is beauty” may indeed express the fluidity and easy blending of these two elements in style.

It may therefore seem arbitrary to attempt to separate them for the purpose of study; but it is necessary to do so in order to present the facts of our problem. Before considering the prose style of Emerson as a whole, as a living design wrought by his thought and art, we shall examine it in relation to its component parts. Let us call *innate art* that expression of truth important above all to its creator; and *technique* the conscious effort to please or enlighten others. Each form of writing will of course be considered from the view-point of its limitations and of its expansion within and without the mind of the author, — the ebb and flow, or the rhythm by which all creation is regulated.

Were it not that some measure of order must be maintained in our estimate of Emerson’s prose style, we might heed his own warning against this very type of vivisection: “How often must we learn the lesson? Men cease to interest us when we find their limitations. The only sin is limitation. As soon as you once come up

with a man's limitations it is all over with him¹". Yet it seems fit and proper to try to disassociate in his writing what is transitory, modish, superimposed, alien even, from what is beyond any doubt the true expression of the man. Too many critics who have condemned his way of writing were only finding fault with his mannerisms. Too many also have seen in his works a mere product of New England. This task of disassociation is no easy one, for when it comes to values in writing no clear-cut delimitations are possible.

Happily, a clue is given us in regard to Emerson's true literary identity. Dualism, or bi-polarity, one of our author's dearest theories, can indeed be applied to him at the very outset. We may wonder if Emerson was not a literary Hamlet, who because of continual spiritual conflicts, took a whole life-time to realize himself, and to find his most perfect mode of expression, perhaps, even, trying but not completely succeeding. In such a case, the word *style* could be considered as a measuring gauge of a man's peculiar talent; for where style would be at its best, there would be the author's greatest potentiality. The word *style* could also be defined as an appropriation, a recreating of language by a personality. It is a fact that Emerson struggled, floundered, — albeit elegantly, — and could not find his true vocation, his true expression. That his style bears testimony to this, we hope to show and explain. From the beginning there was embarrassment in Emerson's style, because he lacked direction; and this perplexity was further accentuated by the double nature of the man.

Firkins stated that "all careful and able writing tends in two directions, inclines to one or other of two opposite poles. On the one hand, literature and extended and meditated speech are social functions — which enjoin decency, politeness, order, consistency, moderation. On the other hand, they reflect the universe and tend to reproduce the variety, the intensity, the barbarity and the extravagance which the universe not seldom discloses... The situation of Emerson is a little odd: he represents expression on an academic basis, or a style based on the norm, trying to convert itself into a style based on the variation²".

The wavering lack of allegiance to defined ideals and standards was, in Emerson, also due to the fact that when he began to write

1. *Circles*, p. 287.

2. O. W. Firkins. *Emerson to-day*, p. 263-264.

the pundits were still all supreme in the remaining strongholds of English culture on the Atlantic seaboard ; while, on the other hand, a decided spirit of independence was abroad, but, alas, without direction. We must therefore, in this study, also inquire into the state of literary United States in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The limitations ascribed to Emerson are also explained by the misconceptions he himself entertained as to his true vocation. During his formative period, he was frustrated, chiefly by himself, in his aspirations : he had the gift of oratory, but he thought that his nature was frigid and forbidding. Yet he had his moments of effusiveness, even of garrulity. We learn from Charles E. Norton that returning from his third visit to Europe Emerson was " the greatest talker in the ship's company ". Again, this duality and antagonism is found in the very temperament of Emerson : for if he frequently accuses himself, — and complacently enough, — of his coldness, he often expresses the wistful longing to communicate with his fellowmen. At the age of twenty-three, he tells us : " I was born cold. My bodily habit is cold. I shiver in and out ; don't heat to the good purposes called enthusiasm a quarter so quick and kindly as my neighbours. Yet so depraved is self-conceit that I sometimes imagined this very seed of wrath to be one of my gifts, though not graces¹. "

Forced into the harness of traditional learning, Emerson always felt the need of expansion ; and eventually, even when he had become a scholar, he exploded in his famous Phi Beta Kappa oration. " Expression is what we want ", he exclaims elsewhere, " not knowledge, but vent²... "

Emerson, then, because of his cultural training, because of his avowed inability to sympathize, saw his real gifts shrink and wither. To quote R. Garnett, " The fact remains that with him, Man Thinking is not so much Man Writing as Man Speaking. This annuls one of the most weighty criticisms upon Emerson as he is regarded merely as an author — his want of continuity — and consequent want of logic. Had he attempted to establish a philosophical system this would have been fatal³... "

How then did Emerson gratify his desire to hold forth, to orate ?

1. *Journals*. September 23, 1826.

2. Cited by P. Chubb. *Introduction to select writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

3. Richard Garnett. *Critical Essay on Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

There must have been some outlets. How did he become practiced in this art? The answer suggests itself: in the Journals he did soliloquize at great length; in the pulpit of the Second Church of Boston he did learn to address others.

The changes in his mode of writing, determined by the subject matter and determined also by the element of time, we shall study under the heading *Evolution of Style*. All the outstanding features of Emerson's writing that are typical of the man, that make us say, "That sounds just like him", we shall deal with as *Emersonisms*.

All that we have said heretofore may be regarded as having contributed to the development of the most characteristic aspect of Emerson's prose style; yet considered separately, the component parts of his style lack the throb of life.

Emergent from his inner consciousness is his creative power, which we shall study under the heading *Innate Art*. This is the real Emerson, who in his essay *Nature* could be taxed with defective style and yet praised for his conjuring of beauty through the very medium of that style.

In the chapters devoted to *Ethics*, *Metaphysics*, and *Intellect* we shall attempt to show Emerson's style as a product of his philosophy.

Inasmuch as *Emersonism* connotes the unusual in him, we intend to represent in Transcendentalism the creative urge also, but a creative urge far more deeply representative of him and of him alone.

We then propose to determine specifically how Emerson measured up to standards that are imposed on style and finally, as a test of the power of his style, we may well ask ourselves what measure of success he has known, what influence he has exercised.

I

FORMATIVE FACTORS

The *Journals* and the *Correspondence* of Emerson are not very revealing of his formative period. From them we receive but scant information regarding the people in his immediate circle whom he admired and endeavored to emulate. Confidential as the former are, they stand more as a soliloquy, an abstract of general ideas, than as a record of personal reactions. His reticence, it is believed, was deliberate : "... he never spoke out of the heat and impulse of the moment... ". The latter (what of it has hitherto been published) yields likewise but few clues. It is well known that he polished and repolished even his most insignificant notes. Cabot, his authorized commentator, deplored this tendency to ward off naturalness : " The letters I have found less directly available than I had hoped. Emerson says that he was not born under epistolary stars' ".

We do know, however, of certain active influences at work upon him within his immediate family circle. For instance, that of his brother Charles, of whom he thought very highly and who imparted a deeper significance to his early mode of expression : " His senses were those of a Greek. I owe to them a thousand observations. To live with him was like living with a great painter. I used to say that I had no leave to see things till he pointed them out, and afterwards I never ceased to see them' ". Later he will insist that it is as a painter of words that he should be known. Then there was the dominating, virile Aunt Mary. Fortitude and the desire to write he acknowledged repeatedly as a debt to her. Did he not strive likewise to imitate her own uplifting style? We may also assume that within the home itself there must have existed a prevalence of moral concepts expressed in the ministerial phraseology created by the eight generations of New England preachers

who preceded him. "Every man is a quotation from all his ancestors", said Emerson; and this may perhaps apply to a man's way of thinking and of talking.

Beyond the family circle, in the University for instance, direct influence on his speech is a matter of surmise. We know that Edward Everett Eliot was professor of Greek at Harvard during Emerson's student days and that the young man admired him very much. Eliot at that time had a reputation as an orator. It may be more than a coincidence that oratory was later destined to become a marked characteristic of Emerson's professional style.

The circle widening further, there is the prized and unescapable Boston culture that we must list among the formative factors, with all that it implied of urbanity, restraint, gentility, aloofness, and nicety of language. Some of these characteristics our author's style certainly exhibits.

Classical culture drawn from the literatures of other lands he freely absorbed. This cultural universality, derived from multifarious readings, has frequently been commented upon. Sherman tells us that Emerson read "Plato, Cicero, Hafiz, Confucius, Budha, Mahomet, Dante, Montaigne, Milton, Voltaire, Kant, Goethe, Napoleon, Coleridge, Carlyle, because that, he finds, is the effective way to set his own intelligence free¹".

He did not wholeheartedly follow contemporary English models. The working of their minds was unlike his, which always reverted to the origin of things, or at least to the general. "'The English shrink from a generalization. They do not look abroad into universality, or they draw only a bucketfull at the fountain of the First Philosophy for their occasion and do not go to the springhead.' Bacon who said this, is almost unique among his countrymen in that faculty²." Nevertheless he did claim kinship and affinity with the great Englishmen of letters. For him, who derided the learning of foreign tongues, they afforded the most accessible standards of good writing, — practically the only ones that could be followed. His knowledge of the English classics was thorough. "He knew Bunyan, he knew Milton by heart³."

How much inspiration he culled from the vivid imagery of *Pilgrim's Progress* cannot be accurately estimated, but the resem-

1. Stuart P. Sherman. *Americans*, p. 70.

2. *English Traits: Literature*.

3. Bliss Perry. *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, p. 71.

blance is often striking. "Cowardice shuts the eyes till the sky is not larger than a calf-skin; shuts the eyes so that we cannot see the horse that is running away with us; worse, shuts the eyes of the mind and chills the heart. Fear is cruel and mean¹..." As with Bunyan, there is also the ever-present allegorical simile: "The fountain of beauty is the heart, and every generous thought illustrates the walls of your chamber²". "Domesticity is the taproot which enables the nation to branch wide and high³."

Quite naturally, Emerson is prone at times to re-echo a well-known metre, a time honoured thought, and blend it in his own creation. Shakespeare is, of course, borrowed from: "With a little thinking, passive almost amidst our sensations, and rounding our lives with a little sleep, we count off our days with a prodigal hand⁴."

That he came to be known as "The Sage of Concord" is proof enough that Emerson's genius was philosophical. A casual perusal of his writings shows at once that his style had this unmistakable strain. Pleasantly enough, but none the less accurately, has he himself described his avocation: "Some play at chess, some at cards, at the Stock Exchange. I prefer to play at Cause and Effect⁵."

Granted the genuineness of the inspiration, it will be conceded that its form had to be learned. In the Greeks he found his first exemplars. "At college he found Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*... He caught the infection and began to read Plato for himself... De Gerando's *Histoire Comparée des Systèmes de Philosophie*, an excellent hand-book explaining the outline of Oriental and Greek philosophies... he mastered thoroughly... The reader will recognize how deeply they affected the boy's vocabulary and mode of thought⁶."

Some of his imagery and wisdom may be due in part to borrowings from the Chinese. We find the following memorandum jotted down with a view to future use: "May use extracts from the She-King, the 3rd number of the Penteteuch of most ancient Chinese classics⁷." The Chinese sage says: "The will of the pure runs

1. *Society and Solitude: Courage.*

2. *Society and Solitude: Domestic Life.*

3. *English Traits: Manners.*

4. *Journals.* February 2, 1827.

5. *Journals.* August 3, 1842.

6. Bliss Perry. *The Heart of Emerson's Journals*, pp. 64-65.

7. *Journals.* August 17, 1843.

down from them into other natures, as water runs from a higher vessel into a lower vessel." Emerson says: "The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards¹." In the essays on *Politics* and *Character* critics have found Emerson's chief debt to China.

The discovery of India by European scholars had given a notable impetus to the dissemination of Hindu culture in America. The debt of Emerson to India is proven by the elaboration of his Transcendental system. His enthusiasm for the philosophical literature of India is unquestioned. Referring to the *Bhagavat Pûrana*, he once remarked to Moncure Conway: "Ah, there is a book to be read on one's knees!" One may speculate as to whether his peculiar habit of seeking deep identities under superficial dissimilarities was not acquired from his reading of India's philosophers: "For the Universe has three children born at one time... which we will call the Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer. These stand respectively for the love of truth, for the love of good, and for the love of beauty²." "Things are, and are not, at the same time... All the universe over there is but one thing, the old Two-Face, creator-creature, mind-matter, right-wrong, of which any proposition may be affirmed or denied³."

The influence of Persian writers pervades Emerson's poetic style, but much less his prose. He was dubious of their shallow, sensual wisdom: "We do not wish to strew sugar on bottled spiders, or try to make mystical divinity out of the song of Solomon, much less out of the erotic and bacchanalian songs of Hafiz". Yet from them he may unconsciously have acquired some of his floridity of form, his fondness for ornament. Certainly the disconnected sentences of Persian writers, "lustres", as he termed them, entranced him.

Let us now turn to American culture centered during Emerson's formative years in and around Boston. We learn that this period almost coincided with the beginning of what might be called the New England Renaissance, which eventually culminated in the Transcendental movement. The prose then extant was above all characterized by a highly artificial formalism, an imitation of the Johnsonian jargon then fashionable in England. Emerson the youth

1. Cited by A. E. Christy. *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, p. 131.

2. *Essays. The Poet*.

3. *Essays. Nominalist and Realist*.

4. *Letters and Social Aims: Persian Poetry*.

must have experienced this sonorous and pompous artificiality, but, independent spirit that he was, he resisted it. As late as 1845 he deplores the lethargic acquiescence of his native city to these alien models.

Originality, vigor and zest were then, as later, distinct qualities of his style : " Our virtue runs in a narrow rill, we have never a freshet. We ought to be subject to enthusiasms. One would like to see Boston and Massachusetts agitated like a wave with some generosity, mad for learning, for music, for philosophy, for association, for freedom, for art ; but now it goes like a peddler with its hand ever in the pocket, cautious, calculating¹. "

But a national awakening was at hand. Among the cultured class itself a reaction was taking place against the English task masters and the too docile Boston Brahmins. Adams, Jefferson, Jackson, Webster and many others had shown the way by making use of the " American " speech. In characterizing this new language Mencken says : " We incline towards a directness of statement, which at its greatest lacks restraint and urbanity altogether, and towards a hospitality which often admits novelties for the mere sake of their novelty, and is quite uncritical of the difference between a genuine improvement in succinctiveness and clarity, and mere extravagant raciness. "

The process of coining new words, which is so typically American, is not really typical of Emerson. It is true that here and there one finds such terms as " afternoon men " (in *Prudence*), " the world globes itself " (in *Compensation*), " clerisy " (in *Manners*) ; but in the main it is rather through applying to words their original meanings that he arrests attention : " exorbitant eyes " (in *Nominalist and Realist*), " private and ineffable glances " (in *Nature*), " the incommunicable trees " (in *Nature*). Likewise by injecting into his speech frankly obsolete or unusual words — as do to this day young reporters playing havoc with the dictionary — he imparts a peculiar flavor to his style : " Laid sweet in his grave " (in *Heroism*), " intenerate " (in *Compensation*), " eviscerated of care " (in *Intellect*), " the rays or appulses " (in *The Poet*), " pulency " (in *Experience*), " the furniture of man " (in *Character*), " disparted " (in *Compensation*).

Directness, even bluntness of statement, which often lacks restraint and urbanity, is frequent in Emerson's writings : « Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of

1. *Journals*. May 3, 1845.

its members. Society is a joint stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue most in request is conformity¹ ". " Do your work and I shall know you. Do your work and you shall re-inforce yourself. A man must consider what a blindman's-buff is this game of conformity. If I know your sect I anticipate your argument¹ ". " Why all this deference to Alfred and Scanderberg and Gustavus. Suppose they were virtuous; did they wear out virtue¹? "

A compact, nervous, brusque, even vehement mode of expression was becoming the chief characteristic of the nation's young and untutored tongue. Emerson cannot be said to have approved of this unreservedly. For one thing, he had little sympathy for raucous and blatant democracy : " I like man, but not men ", he declares in his Journals. He loved refinement and had been reared in an atmosphere of idealism, maintained within and without his home by a strong puritanical tradition. The materially-minded plebs caused him to shrink away and turn to the spiritualism in which his whole style is steeped : " I find that Americans have no passions, they have appetites ", is a comment also found in his Journals. This does not mean, however, that, although a purist, he did not seek to attain the clear, forceful language of humble, every-day life. He admired the artisan, who, speaking of matters pertaining to his trade, does not betray hesitancy as does the scholar : " ... for blacksmiths and teamsters do not trip in their speech; it is a shower of bullets. It is the Cambridge men who correct themselves and begin again at every half sentence, and moreover will pun and refine too much, and swerve from the matter to the expression²... " He may then be said to have learned useful lessons from colloquial usage : virility of expression and a desire to subserve the thought to the effect. " What mischief is in the art of writing. An unlettered man considers a fact to learn what it means; the lettered man does not sooner see it than it occurs to him how it can be told. And this fact of looking at it as an artist blinds him to the better half of the fact³. "

Yet culture he did acquire. After all, one of the attributes of creative culture consists in learning to use a language relevant to a given subject. It may savour of jargon, but it is necessary in order

1. *Self-Reliance*.

2. *Representative Men : Montaigne or the Sceptic*

3. *Journals*. August, 1834.

to reach others, to talk to them in their own vernacular. "To be in perfect agreement with a man of most opposite conclusions, you have only to translate your language into his. The same thought which you call God, in his nomenclature is called Christ. In the language of William Penn, moral sentiment is called Christ¹". Emerson's constructive thinking is then to be measured by the fine evaluation of his phraseology, and that in its turn is determined by his scholarship or culture.

From the host of possible influences there emerge three which certainly left a lasting imprint upon the young Emerson : that of Carlyle, whose literary undertakings he tried to duplicate ; that of Swedenborg, whose peculiar metaphysics he espoused ; and that of Montaigne, whose *Essays* he avowedly took as the model of his own work.

Regarding Carlyle, it must be stated that Emerson knew of the danger involved in following him. Referring to a contemporary English writer, he says in his *Journals*, "Espinesse... writes unmitigated Carlylese". However, what he particularly admired in Carlyle was his exceedingly forceful and natural style : "I think he has seen as no other in our time how inexhaustible a mine is the language of conversation. He does not use the written dialect of the time... but draws strength and mother-wit out of a poetic use of the spoken vocabulary, so that his paragraphs are all a sort of splendid conversation²."

Carlyle's manner would be, then, a transposition into writing of what might be termed the emotional style. He did not scorn devices or "tricks of the trade", some of which are revealed by the critic Saintsbury : "Mechanical devices of capitals — a revival of old habits, — italics, dashes, etc. Stenographic tricks as regards grammar, and generally all parts of speech, which by relying strictly on the reader's ability to perceive the meaning without them can be omitted, and the omission of which both gives points of freshness to the whole...³" Now these very devices were also used, with effect, by Emerson himself throughout his entire prose work, but of course more so in his *Journals*, since these were straight jottings-down of day by day reflexions, later to be amplified. In *English Traits*, the author scorns italics as a cheap expedient and a betrayal of straight and honest writing ; but he was

1. *Journals*. May, 1832.

2. *Journals*. March 29, 1837.

3. G. Saintsbury. *A Short History of English Literature*.

not above using them occasionally in his *Essays*. The training undergone by Emerson for the pulpit may have contributed somewhat to the development of this idiosyncrasy. The style of oratory seems to demand this pent-up virulence.

Another and more striking similarity between the two writers is the short, incisive phrase, self-contained, self-sufficient and self-explanatory : " It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude¹. " Ironically enough, it is perhaps Carlyle who gave the most famous definition of the Emersonian style, when he compared the *Essays* to " bags of shots ". The staccato of the Carlylian phrase also provided a good example of that sort of style.

If there was in the life of Emerson a period covered by the influence of Carlyle's brutal and masterful style, another is assuredly to be dedicated to Swedenborg, whose metaphysical utterances held Emerson in thrall. Hegel's obscurity he could not fathom, much less imitate, but the Scandinavian had won his unstinted reverence and commanded his awe. Like him, he built on precarious premises pseudo-scientific disquisitions; and there, we believe, is the origin of Emerson's well-known paragraphs in which philosophy and scientific facts are linked in apparent harmony, and the godliness of man is proved by the timely hatching of the cocoon. " An inevitable dualism bisects nature, so that each thing is a half, and suggests another thing to make it whole; as, spirit, matter; man, woman; odd, even; subjective, objective; in, out; upper, under; motion, rest; yea, nay². " " Time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes, but the soul is light : where it is, is day : where it was, is night³... " " We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams.³ " "

Another specific influence of a great thinker upon Emerson is that of Montaigne. For if Carlyle taught him how to make the most of mannerisms in style, if from Swendenborg he received the

1. *Self-Reliance*.

2. *Compensation*.

3. *Self-Reliance*.

matrix in which to cast what thoughts came readily to his philosophic mind, Montaigne delighted him and fired him with a desire to write essays, his chief contribution to literature. That he was keenly enthusiastic of the peerless essayist there can be no question : " Yesterday I delighted myself with Michel de Montaigne. With all my heart I embrace the grand old sloven. He pricks and stings the sense of virtue in me¹. " In writing his own essays he constantly had an eye on the old master, borrowing even his similes when the occasion so required. His essay on friendship is a striking example of this borrowing.

Very early in his career Emerson had known the works of Montaigne. Even in translation he had been able to identify himself with him, in spite of Montaigne's scepticism; had dreamed while reading him of the book he should write some day. We assume that, his study being thus motivated, he must have consciously been aware of Montaigne's composition : " In Roxbury in 1825 I read Cotton's translation of Montaigne. It seemed to me as if I had written the book myself in some former life, so sincerely it spoke my thought and experience. No book before or since was ever so much to me as that². " Mellowness and sophistication, which are found in some of Emerson's more mature essays, he may have learned from Montaigne, for your true essayist affects detachment : " For me, what I may call the autumnal style of Montaigne keeps all its old attraction³. "

What Emerson prized in Montaigne was his ubiquitous interest, and the movement of his sentence, his " living " style : " I know not anywhere the book that seems less written. It is the language of conversation transferred to a book. Cut these words, and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive⁴... "

In the foregoing pages the endeavor has been to show the various influences instrumental in the formation of Emerson's prose style. First the home; next the college associates, Boston, the acquaintance with the literatures of other lands in general; then the new American culture and language; and finally the definite influence of Carlyle, Swedenborg and Montaigne. However, an author's style is not readily classified, and one cannot with authority affirm that it grew out of this or of that. Style, being " of the man ", may

1. *Journals*. August 8, 1835.

2. *Journals*, March, 1843.

3. *Journals*. August 31, 1844.

4. *Representative Men : Montaigne or the Sceptic*.

develop even in spite of all obvious determinants. Let us then limit ourselves to saying that in all likelihood Emerson, entering upon his literary career, had to draw upon an experience based on a scholarly and pious background, a new and vigorous language, and the works of great writers to which his versatile mind was drawn.

II

FORMATION OF EMERSON'S TECHNIQUE

If we consider technique as certain methods of achieving effects, even as a deliberate striving after effect, we find that Emerson, original and independent though he was, employed definite literary procedures as well as imitated some outstanding men.

The love of words for their own sake, a tendency to play with them before they become charged with the deeper significance accruing from experience, is usually strong in stylists, incipient or accomplished. Emerson knew this lure. In a reminiscent mood he wrote : " I remember when a child in the pew on Sundays amusing myself with saying over common words as ' black ', ' white ', ' board ', etc... twenty or thirty times until the word lost all meaning and fixedness, and I began to doubt which was the right name for the thing when I saw neither had any natural relation, but all were arbitrary. It was a child's lesson in Idealism¹. " To him, words often had a residual meaning that could be used to good advantage in order to shorten paragraphs : " Classifying words outvalues many arguments : upstart, cockney, granny, pedant, prig, precisian, rowdy, niggers...² " The first step in the formation of his desultory style seems therefore to have taken the form of a search for words charged with meaning and a storing of them for future use. In the earliest *Journals*, when Emerson was only sixteen, we note the following collection :

" Coldest complexion of age, rescuing and crowning virtue, ill-conditioned, cameleon, zeal, booked-in, alphabet, cushioned, compunction, beleaguered, halidom, galloping, whortleberry, spikenard, staunch, council-chamber, star-crossed, till its dye was doubled on the crimson cross, countless multitudes, abutments, panoply, sycophant smile, kidnapping, beheaded, demigods. signal (adjective),

1. *Journals*. August 22, 1841.

2. *Journals*. May 8, 1844.

Cleopatra, ambidexter, register (verb), defalcation. "Thirty years later he was still collecting words and expressions that might eventually spring to life again: " *Memoranda for Manners*. John Quincy Adams, wavy iron, limp bad. Claverhouse, feminine virility. English red-dough full of culture and power. *Never allude to sickness*. People who are biped weeping willows. Creepmouse manners¹..." To this habit of isolating word-ideas may be attributed his lack of logical continuity, which has often been commented upon. For example, "English red-dough full of culture and power", jotted down in 1850, was saved up until 1856 when it was embodied in *English Traits*. Emerson had in the meantime visited England again and might have changed his point of view about the English; but the first cliché was striking, and so he used it irrespective of the time that had elapsed since he had created it, irrespective also of any new impression that might have invalidated it.

"Emerson loved words", Firkins tell us, "not merely as symbols but as toys or castanets to jingle against each other... 'thrifty trees grow in spite of ice, lice, mice, and lovers' (*Power* VI) 'the old Two-Face, creator creature, mind-matter, right-wrong' (*Nominalists and Realists* III)... 'We owe to man man' (*Domestic Life*, VII)... Emerson's delight in words as such led him to philological experimentations, such as 'selfdom, fromness, otherest, haster, seemer, bugdom, flydom, ungod².' "

Curiosity in new word-combinations, rather than the constitutional negligence often hinted at by critics, may be responsible for his peculiar use of preterites and participles: "having drank", "have rode"; of odd comparatives and superlatives: "liker", "perfecter", "learnedest", "willingliest"; of split infinitives: "to fairly disengage"; of solecisms: "he is me and I am him."

Always intent on choosing words that "reeked of things", he deliberately made use of expressions well designed to cause the purists to writhe. "The vocabulary of an omniscient man would embrace words and images excluded from polite conversation³." Coarseness did not deter him: "Gastric noises" make their appearance in *Demonology* X; he speaks in *Works and Days*, VIII, of "cracking fleas in the sunshine"; and of "putrid black vomit" in his *Letter to Carlyle*. However, Emerson sedulously avoided slang.

His technique in regard to the choice of words was to preserve

1. *Journals*. Nov. 16, 1850.

2. O. W. Firkins. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

3. *The Poet*.

the inner or original meaning. "It is a rule of Rhetoric always to have an eye to the *primary* sense of word we use¹." The following terms, taken from his essay on *Manners*, show how close he often kept to the primary sense of words. We shall italicize the word which Emerson uses in its primary sense, then in parenthesis give the original meaning of that word, which Emerson wished to express. Few Americans of our day would see in these words the meaning which it was Emerson's intention to give them. "It is great by their *allowance*" (by what they admit); "the noble *exception* of your presence" (exclusion); "a *pet* madness in his brain" (slight fit or passion); "the Byzantine *pile* of Chivalry" (pillar); "the *saucy* homage of parody" (insolent); "he carried the *holiday* in his eye" (joy of seeing); "all his information is a little *impertinent*" (irrelevant); "which *consists* with good fellowship" (agrees); "Napoleon managed to *rally*. Cardinal Caprara's green spectacles *off*" (to attack with railery and cause to be removed).

In addition to this punctiliousness in regard to word meanings, there is quite a scholarly ring to Emerson's style. Quotations from the great and the near-great appear everywhere. Of course it would be difficult to imagine a collection of traditionally penned essays, as his were, entirely shorn of quotations. Yet their frequency shows decidedly that they are intentional. Emerson himself has declared, "I often need the device of ascribing my sentence to another in order to give it more weight. Carlyle does so²."

His erudition also displays itself in a wealth of technical terms; and a certain pedantry results at which the reader may feel slightly resentful. Such enumerations as "Aster solidageneus... solidago bicolor... Eupatorium white and red... Spirae Tomentosa" are somewhat irksome. Scientific or pseudo-scientific comparisons are, alas, not rare: "Polarity or action and reaction we meet in every part of nature; in darkness and light; in heat and cold; in the ebb and flow of waters; in male and female... in the systole and diastole of the heart; in the undulation of fluids and of sound; in the centrifugal and centripetal gravity; in electricity, galvanism, and chemical affinity. Superinduce magnetism at one end of a needle, and the opposite magnetism takes place at the other end³." "Every substance is negatively electric to that which stands above it in the

1. *Journals*. March 14, 1836.

2. *Journals*. September 8, 1853.

3. *Compensation*.

chemical tables, positively to that which stands below it. Water dissolves wood and iron and salty-air dissolves water... but the intellect dissolves fire, gravity, laws, method and the subtlest unnamed relations of nature in its resistless menstruum. Intellect lies behind genius which is intellect constructive¹. " And this is found in a great portion of Emersons's writings.

Pedantry finds other outlets in Emerson. The use of terms reputably archaic or unusual, mingled with the modern, gives an impression of a deliberate show of knowledge. This is particularly true of the *Journals* : " For the order of Providence in the world fights against such a man; and somewhere on his way, maugre all his forecasts and all his fetches, he will be unexpectedly circumvented and thrown out². " And again : " Monday Evening : Bartlett's, Amherst. I set ninety miles from home and three from the Institute, and have the pleasure and eke the honour, to waft, on the winged steed of a wish, my best regards to the lords and ladye who sit at home; to the Majesty of Tartary, chieftest of men, calling the young satraps to order from the elbow chair and secretly meditating golden schemes in an iron age, to the young lion of the tribe (to change the metaphor) now resting and musing on his honourable oars; next to my loud-voiced and spare-built friend, loving duty better, oh, abundantly better than pudding; last to the medalled youth, the anxious Driver and Director of the whole establishment; peace to his Bones. My worthy landlord wishes blessings to the Amherst Institute, which saith he, howbeit it may have had a muddy foundation, yet the Lord hath blessed³. " In the *Essays*, however, the effect is much more subdued : " I would put myself in the attitude to look in the eye an abstract truth, and I cannot. I blench and withdraw on this side and that... Let him intend his mind without respite... in one direction. His best heed long time avails him nothing... We all but apprehend, we dimly forebode the truth⁴. "

But technique in style is more than a matter of words, original and striking as words may be. It also consists in the making of a pattern to which the words themselves will prove acceptable or unfitting. " No man ", Emerson has said, " can write well who

1. *Intellect*.

2. *Journals*. January 4, 1827.

3. *Journals*. August 25, 1823.

4. *Intellect*.

thinks there is any choice of words for him... There is no beauty in words except in their collocation¹. ”

In our chapter on the evolution of the author's style, we shall attempt to determine whether he succeeded in creating the ideal pattern for his thoughts.

In the present chapter we have seen that Emerson, caught early in life by the mesmeric power of words, began to form a technique of word selection and to experiment with those that seemed to possess deep implication or primary significance; that his cultural background enabled him to impart to his style a definite appearance of learning; that his blending of the obsolete and the modern gave to his style a decidedly unusual flavour.

1. *Journals*. July 8, 1831.

III

INNATE ART

Style can be considered as a frequency of ideas framed in the phraseology peculiar to one man. As such it may be said to be organic, for it is then the visible sign of his personal expression, an index to his character.

Emerson, however, suffered from some inhibitions; and these should be known, for they mark the limitations of his style. One was a form of indolence, which manifested itself in enumerations of lifeless abstractions. Referring to Thoreau, he said he found in him the same thought, the same spirit that was in himself, but illustrated by excellent images that he, Emerson, conveyed in sleepy generalities. Such generalities are all too common in our author's work: "Neither by detachment, neither by aggregation is the integrity of the intellect transmitted to its works, but by a vigilance which brings the intellect in its greatness and best state to operate every moment. It must have the same wholeness which nature has. Although no diligence can rebuild the universe in a model by the best accumulation or disposition of details, yet does the world reappear in miniature in every event, so that all the laws of nature may be read in the smallest fact¹." Indolence can again explain Emerson's habit of using over and again similar ideas and material: "We know better than we do..."; "We are wiser than we know"; "For men are better than they know"; and "We are all wise" are used in his essays *The Oversoul*, *Compensation* and *The Intellect*. "Respect the *naturlangsamkeit* which hardens the ruby in a million years", counsels Emerson in his essay on *Friendship*; and in the same essay he urges us to "Leave to the diamond its ages to grow". In *Friendship* and the *Oversoul* we find these three similar aphorisms: "Almost all people descend to meet"; "I cannot descend to meet"; and "Men descend to meet".

1. *Intellect*.

Another limitation was Emerson's alleged frigidity, which tends to kill the creative urge. It dampens exuberance and zest. He himself complains of it : " I spend myself prudently ; I economize ; I cheapen ; whereof nothing grand ever grew " ; and " I have not the recollection of one strong moment ". He also declares, " I was born a seeing eye, not a helping hand ". His essays certainly do not reveal warmth save on those rare occasions when his indignation is thoroughly aroused. In the *Journals* themselves, where one might expect to find a little display of feeling, we are repelled by the brief casualness he affects in personal matters : " I visited Ellen's tomb and opened the coffin. " On the same date, this edifying memorandum shows a solicitude for his own well-being that is shocking when coupled with his concern for the memory of his dead wife : " 28 March. My food per diem weighed 14-1/4 oz. 29 March. My food per diem weighed 13 oz. "

Was utter selfishness then his keynote ? I think not. Under the guise of indifference how much real feeling wells up at times ! How much fatherly pride is compressed in this brevity : " Waldo walks alone. " And in the same *Journal*, what extremes of sorrow, of revolt and of pathos appear in these few lines : " Yesterday night at fifteen minutes after eight my little Waldo ended his life... Every tramper that ever tramped is abroad, but the little feet are still. He gave up his innocent breath like a bird. " What seems the truth about Emerson's emotional nature is that it was pitilessly repressed in himself and suppressed in his writings. All that his self-imposed restraint allowed him was to proclaim his love of mankind in an ethereal way : " He is mine. I am my brother and my brother is me. If I feel overshadowed and outdone by great neighbors I can yet love¹. "

Emerson had a natural instinct for writing. The fact that he sedulously kept a journal for many years in which he consigned his thoughts against the day when he could embody them in a continuous work is proof of that ; but he frequently expresses diffidence : " What right have I to write of Prudence, whereof I have little, and that of the negative sort² ? " " Alas for this infirm faith, this will not strenuous, this vast ebb of a vast flow ! I am God in nature ; I am a weed by the wall². " Yet his works do show buoyancy and optimism : " Nothing great was ever achieved without

1. *Prudence*.

2. *Circles*.

enthusiasm¹. ” “ Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat ; up again, old heart² ! ” “ We grant that life is mean, but how did we find out that it was mean ? What is the ground of this uneasiness of ours ; of this old discontent³ ? ”

At the same time, his style betrays a saturnine disposition, often an inclination to moroseness, for which he admonishes himself roundly in his Journal : “ Be cheerful. What an insane habit is this of groping always into the past months and scraping together every little pitiful instance of awkwardness and misfortune. ” One finds such expressions of melancholy as these : “ Let any man go back to those delicious relations which make the beauty of his life... he will shrink and groan⁴ ”. “ After interviews have been compassed with long foresight we must be tormented presently by baffled blows, by sudden unreasonable apathies, by epilepsies of wit and of animal spirits, in the heyday of friendship and thought. Our faculties do not play us true⁵. ” “ The men we call greatest are least in this kingdom. There is a fatal dislocation in our relation to nature, distorting our modes of living and making every law our enemy⁶. ” “ Truth is our element of life, yet if a man fasten his attention on a single aspect of truth... the truth becomes distorted and not itself but falsehood... Every thought is a prison also⁷. ”

Emerson contracted early the habit of heterogeneous readings, hence the disconcerting jumps we observe in his works. His interests lay in all directions. He says, “ My cardinal vice of intellectual dissipation... is my cardinal vice still ” ; and “ We are wasted with our versatility... I jilt twenty books whenever I fix on one ” ; “ I am the victim of miscellany ”. His paragraphs are crammed with a hodge-podge of unrelated facts, which produce bewilderment in the reader : “... from his first pile of toys or chip bridge to the masonry of Minot Rock Lighthouse or the Pacific Railroad ; from the tatooing of the Owhyhees to the Vatican Gallery ; from the simplest expedient of private prudence to the American Constitution⁸... ”

1. *Circles.*

2. *Experience.*

3. *The Oversoul.*

4. *Love.*

5. *Friendship.*

6. *Prudence.*

7. *Intellect.*

8. *Art.*

To compel inspiration, to conquer his apathy, was for Emerson the first lesson to be learned. He complained of the uncontrollable ebb and flow of his thought. He was that which he heartily detested — a creature of moods. "Our moods never believe in each other¹." "Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads... they prove to be many-coloured lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus.. Temperament is the iron wire on which the beads are strung¹." Beneficial or depressing, such were his moods. Intemperance of speech, enthusiasm, academic formalism were the results.

This led him to question his own sincerity. "I am always insincere, as always knowing there are other moods²." There can be little doubt that his phraseology was often peculiar. Was this the sign of a lack of sincerity, of artificial padding, of a meaningless accumulation of jingling words? "I cannot make your consciousness tantamount to mine. Only the star dazzles; the planet has a faint, moon-like ray. I hear what you say of the admirable part and tried temper of the party you praise, but I see well that for all his purple cloaks, I shall not like him, unless he is a poor Greek like me. I cannot deny it, O friend, that the vast shadow of the Phenomenal includes thee also in its pied and painted immensity³." In *Spiritual Laws*, he speaks of the quality that "differences" one man from any other; and of a "quincunx of trees with terminal acrostic". In *Circles*, he speaks of "Moons, which are no more bounds to spiritual power than bat-balls". His style sometimes assumes an air of oddity confining on the absurd: "Let who will ask Where is the fruit? I find a private fruit sufficient. This is a fruit, — that I should not ask for a rash effect from meditations, counsels and the hiving of truths⁴." "The maples and ferns are still uncorrupt; yet no doubt when they come to consciousness they too will curse and swear⁵." Mannerisms or manners, — the critics are loath to decide which.

Of course his love of nature was great. We know that he felt entranced in its glorious sight, that he wished to lose his identity in it; and here his grandiloquence may be considered permissible.

1. *Temperament.*

2. *Nominalist and Realist.*

3. *Friendship.*

4. *Experience.*

5. *Nature.*

"I see the spectacle of morning... I seem to partake its rapid transformations; the active enchantment reaches my dust, and I dilate and conspire with the morning wind¹. " Yet, once when on his travels he launched upon a tirade to some trees, " You gentlemen pines... " he did leave his companions somewhat bewildered.

When Fancy ruled his moods, he became whimsical, even Puckish: " There is none without a foible. I believe that if an angel should come to chant the chorus of the moral law, he would eat too much gingerbread, or take liberties with private letters, or do some precious atrocity². " " I endeavored to show my good men that I liked everything by turns and nothing long; that I loved the centre, but doated on the superficies; that I loved man, if men seemed to me mice and rats³. " " We may have the sphere for our cricketball, but not a berry for our philosophy⁴... ".

If Emerson did not trust his moods, he believed implicitly in his instincts. His admonition, " Revere your intuitions " has become a commonplace. " One is daunted by every one of a multitude of rules which we read in books of criticism, but when we speak or write *unconsciously* we are carried through them all safely without offending or perceiving one⁵. " To him, and in spite of his own difficulty in achieving it, spontaneity should be the only requisite of true writing. " Our thinking is a pious reception⁶. " No wonder that his utterances have been found " Delphic, inspirational⁷ " and of an oracular and ambiguous quality: " Let us be silent, — so that we may hear the whisper of the Gods. Let us not interfere. Who set you to cast about what you should say to the select souls or how to say anything to such? ... Wait, and thy heart shall speak. Wait until the necessary and everlasting overpowers you, until day and night avail themselves of your lips⁸. " " We all stand waiting, empty... Then cometh the God and converts the statues into fiery men, and by a flash of his eye burns up the veil which shrouds all things... All that we reckoned settled

1. *Nature*.

2. *Nominalist and Realist*.

3. *Nominalist and Realist*.

4. *Experience*.

5. *Journals*. September, 1834.

6. *Intellect. Experience*.

7. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

8. *Friendship*.

shakes and rattles ; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes¹. ”

It may be that the trance-like inspiration that was so characteristically his was the most germane to his real personality. It is certain that many people, on meeting him, were awed by his presence. Lowell remarked, “ There was a majesty about him beyond all other men I have known and he dwelt habitually in that ampler and diviner air to which most of us, if ever, rise but occasionally ”. He had preeminently an all-embracing moral sense and the main sources of his inspiration go unerringly back to God.

They also find their source in Nature : “ All my thoughts are foresters. I have scarce a day-dream on which the breath of the pines has not blown, and their shadows waved². ” He thus qualifies his praise of Tennyson : “ He has no wood-notes³. ” Nature with him is well-nigh an obsession ; many of his most abstract thoughts are in their conclusion vitalized by a natural simile : “ All our progress is an unfolding, like the vegetable bud. You have first an instinct, then an opinion, then a knowledge, as the plant has root, bud and fruit⁴. ” “ The poet names the thing because he sees it... This expression or naming is not art, but a second nature, grown out of the first, as a leaf out of a tree⁵. ” “ So it is with this calamity ; it does not touch me ; something of which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me and leaves no scar. It was caducous⁶. ”

One of the most discernible driving forces which go to form Emerson's innate art and that ever and anon break through the fabric of his style is that which betokens character. It may, and does, assume various garbs according to the faculties it brings into play. Among these are originality, imagination, independence, courage, and pride. These will be considered in their proper place.

It can be said that Emerson's natural or innate art, thwarted to a certain extent by some inhibitory influences, such as native indolence, lack of warmth, diffidence, melancholy, and wasteful versatility, further suffered frequent eclipses because of the author's

1. *Circles*.

2. *Journals*. May, 1837.

3. *Journals*. September, 1843.

4. *Intellect*.

5. *The Poet*.

6. *Experience*.

changeable moods. He, however, partly overcame these handicaps by trusting to inspiration conveyed to him by his instincts and derived from his ever-present consciousness of God and of Nature. His character, which imparts to his style its most forcible qualities, firmly centered upon morality and the intellect.

IV

COMPOSITION AND EVOLUTION OF EMERSON'S STYLE

The composition of the *Essays* and other prose writings of Emerson has now to be considered, organically and functionally. What very definite factors determined this composition? Does his prose style show any specific evolution for which a logical explanation can be given?

It should first be borne in mind that Emerson was "for better or for worse a New Englander". Restraint, earnestness, practical outlook are traits included in that term. "Moral qualities rule the world, but at short distances the senses are despotic. The same discrimination of fit and fair runs out, if with less vigor, into all parts of life. The average spirit of the energetic class is good sense, acting under certain limitations and to certain ends... It delights in measure. The love of beauty is merely the love of measure or proportion¹." "Why not realize your world? But far be from me the despair which prejudges the law by a paltry empiricism: — since there never was a right endeavor but it succeeded. Patience and patience, we shall win at the last. We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life²." "We must have kings, and we must have nobles. Nature provides such in every society, — only let us have the real instead of the titular³." "We must learn the language of facts⁴."

The nucleus, or skeleton, of most of Emerson's prose work is to be looked for in his Journals. In them we have the first evidences of his labours, the germs of ideas later to be elaborated and orga-

1. *Manners.*

2. *Experience.*

3. *The Young American.*

4. *Intellect.*

nized. " This book is my Savings Bank. I grow richer because I have somewhere to deposit my learnings ; and fractions are worth more to me because corresponding fractions are waiting here that shall be made integers by their addition. " The range of the *Journal* was at first limitless. The title he gave it, " The Wide World ", is sufficiently indicative. Later, however, little note-books devoted to specific subjects gave proof of greater discrimination. Generally speaking, his method in the *Essays* consisted in seizing upon an idea and in waiting for illustrations, arguments and cognate thoughts to come to it. In this way he gained in density. Yet, though the texture of the whole was organic enough, the fact that it had not been logically developed produced an effect not unlike that of a crazy-quilt pattern. " The thought ", observed Canby in *Classic Americans*, " runs not forward in a line, but back and forth from the centre to the periphery — from idea to subject. " It may be interesting to observe this " running back and forth ", as evidenced in one of Emerson's paragraphs: " If we consider what persons have stimulated and profited us, we shall perceive the superiority of the spontaneous or intuitive principle over the arithmetical or logical. The first contains the second, but virtual and latent. We want in every man a long logic ; we cannot pardon the absence of it, but it must not be spoken. Logic is the procession or proportionate unfolding of the intuition ; but its virtue is as silent method ; the moment it would appear as propositions and have a separate value, it is worthless¹. " It will be granted that a logical development of the thought contained in the above passage can be summarized by the following general propositions in the order set forth: First, intuition is superior to logic. Second, this is proven by a consideration of persons who have stimulated or profited us. Third, logic also is not a thing in itself. Fourth, it is a byproduct of intuition. Fifth, logic is only the unfolding of intuition. If we compare this order of development with that of Emerson's, we find that he begins with the second proposition, shunts back to the first, goes forward to the fifth, and again back to the third, and finally forward to the fourth.

The notes in the *Journal* being personal reminders, it follows, since lengthy developments are unnecessary, that a certain cryptic tone results, which at times reaches the point of incoherence: " Steam should be solid — Every man somewhere solid — Poor man at six hours, six weeks, six months, six years — Scholars

1. *Intellect*.

should not carry their memories to balls¹. " In the *Essays*, incoherence is less marked, yet the ideas are often disjointed. " But every insight from this realm of thought is felt as initial, and promises a sequel. I do not make it; I arrive there, and behold what was there already, I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantine joy...²" There must be very two, before there can be very one. Let it be an alliance of two large, formidable natures, mutually beheld, mutually feared, before yet they recognize the deep identity which beneath these disparities, unites them³. "

Fancy takes a hand in this foreshortening of thought, and the style abounds in conceits: " Romeo if dead, should be cut up into little stars to make the heavens fine⁴. " " The waters of the great deep have ingress and egress to the soul⁵. " " Under an oak-tree loaded with leaves and nuts, under a sky full of eternal eyes, I stand in a thoroughfare⁶..."

Emerson's lectures are the natural outcome of his Journals. As most of his essays were in their turn derived from his lectures and addresses, it may be profitable to know something of the latter. Had he a definite method in composing his lectures? We learn that he would first select a theme and then ransack his note-books for pertinent passages which could be strung on the theme like beads on a string. When he had material enough he would stand before his audience and trust to the inspiration of the moment to fill the gaps. Let us mention, however, that he seldom spoke extemporaneously. While giving, as he frequently did, the same lectures to different groups, he experimented with the delivery in order to produce the immediate effect he desired. Exaggerations crept in, and the essays bear their imprint. " I think nothing is of any value in books excepting the transcendental and extraordinary⁷. " " History has been mean; our nations have been mobs; we have never seen a man⁸.... " The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics⁹! " " A friend... is a paradox in nature¹⁰. " "... the

1. *Journals*. October, 1841.

2. *Experience*.

3. *Friendship*.

4. *Love*.

5. *Intellect*.

6. *Art*.

7. *The Poet*.

8. *Character*.

9. *The Poet*.

10. *Friendship*

President has paid dear for his White House. It has commonly cost him all his peace, and the best of his manly attributes¹... ”

In his lectures, he was, we are told by Perry, “ a spellbinder, made epigrams, paradoxes without end — played with his public, taking up idea after idea, examining it as if he had never seen it before, turning it over to look at the other side of it ”. His tendency to epigrams, his paradoxes, we shall study later. The habit of playing with ideas persisted in Emerson, for it was in the very nature of his mentality to create an impression by shock-provoking surprises. Let us take at random a short passage from his *Nominalist and Realist*, in which he uses opposing ideas to surprise his public : “ All things show us that on every side we are very near to the best. It seems not worth while to execute with too much pains some one intellectual, or aesthetical, or civil feat, when presently the dream will scatter, and we shall burst into universal power. The reason of idleness and of crime is the deferring of our hopes. Whilst we are waiting we beguile the time with jokes, with sleep, with eating, and with crimes. ” The thought therein expressed can be interpreted thus, in four main propositions. *First, man is nearly perfect* but feels that it is not worth while realizing his potentialities, because, *second, all is a dream*, so he waits for the millenium. While waiting, he has to pass the time and does so *third, by busying himself with material concerns*, and *fourth by doing evil*. The first and fourth proposition and the two medial propositions, are paired in startling opposition.

To charge words with unsuspected meanings was one of the novelties that made people flock to his lectures. The *Essays* are full of such contrivances. In *Nature*, one notes the following : “ The bleak upper sides of the planet... the knapsack of custom... the uncommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them and quit our solemn trifles... No history or church or state is interpolated on the divine sky and the immortal year... A delicate realm of sunset and moonlight too bright almost for the spotted man... emerging stars with the private and ineffable glances. ”

On the whole, the skilful illustrations and anecdotes that Emerson consigned in his journal for use in his lectures were not retained in the essays to any appreciable extent. He does, it is true, refer to deeds and sayings of great men, but more to add to the body of the discourse than to sustain interest; and he does so to no greater extent than is customary in this type of writing.

1. *Compensation*.

The tone of the essay should be pitched high. Emerson also believed that the tone of any good speaking or writing should be sustained on a high level. "As soon as a man writes he makes an effort at raising his thoughts for a wider appeal¹." "The man that just now chatted at your side of trifles, rises in the assembly to speak, and speaks to them collectively in a tone and with a series of thoughts he would never think of assuming to only one of them alone. Because man's universal nature is his inmost nature¹." Emerson wrote with ease in a lofty vein, for his constant concern was the universal, the moral man.

Critics have stated that he composed sentences, but did not build paragraphs because his thought was sporadic and he saw by flashes. The difficulty he seemed to experience in managing his transitions can be partly explained by his method of writing. "Most of the time he spent on his work", says Cabot, "he spent in searching his note-books new and old, for fresh matter that might be introduced with advantage. In this way it happened sometimes that writing of very different dates was brought together... the *Essay on Immortality*... contains passages within fifty years apart from each other."

It is certain that this essay, for all its occasionally admirable passages, leaves an impression of inconsistency, which is often reproduced in other works of Emerson. In one paragraph, for instance, we read a condemnation of death, on which people like the Egyptians "ponderously determine the soul". In another paragraph, the author quotes Schiller and Michael Angelo to prove the beneficence of Death, the revealer in life. Elsewhere in the same essay Emerson avers that the "mind delights in immense time... in stability", and so conceives eternity. Later, and always in the same essay, he says that Jesus' influence "took people out of time, and they felt eternal". Against this stability, image of permanency and proof of immortality, he goes on to say that "as a hint of endless being, we may rank that novelty which perpetually attends life". In spite of startling discrepancies, however, the whole of this, as of other essays, remains homogeneous, for it rests upon Emerson's unequivocal theories and beliefs everlastingly reiterated. Unity is also insured by the very peculiarity of the author's phraseology.

Whether a paragraph can be considered as being "built" only insofar as it conforms to the strict laws of logical sequence is a

1. *Journals*. June, 1835.

moot point, and perhaps unfair in Emerson's case, for we should remember that his style was that of the spoken language. Forms and arguments dictated by a desire to appeal to the emotions must have gone into the essays from the lectures.

It must be granted, however, that Emerson was often guilty of assembling unrelated or loosely related ideas in one paragraph; and naturally the structure was thereby weakened. "Yet the systole and diastole of the heart are not without their analogy in the ebb and flow of love. Friendship, like the immortality of the soul, is too good to be believed. The lover beholding his maiden, half knows that she is not verily that which he worships¹." "Some heavenly days must have been intercalated somewhere, like those that Hermes won with dice of the Moon, that Osiris might be born. It is said all martyrdoms looked mean when they were suffered. Every ship is a romantic object except that we sail in... Our life looks trivial and we shun to record it. Men seem to have learned of the horizon the art of perpetual retreating and reference. 'Yonder uplands are rich pasturage, and my neighbor has fertile meadows, but my field', say the querulous farmer, 'only holds the world together'²."

The use of similes, without regard to their collocations, often occurs, and the conglomeration of concrete images thus conjured up borders on the incongruous: "The *Key* to every man is his thought. Sturdy and defying though he look, *he has a helm* which he obeys, which is the idea after which all his facts are classified. He can only be reformed by showing him a new idea which commands his own. The life of man is a *self-evolving circle*³."

Numbering as a mode of classification can be found occasionally in Emerson's writing, which might indicate a deliberate attempt at organization; but it is to be feared that such numberings are rather employed oratorically, much as a preacher reminds himself of points he wants to make. We must remember that Emerson first acquired his oral technique in the pulpit, even if he perfected it on the platform. In *Self-Reliance* he enumerated the different capacities of men to be affected by greater self-reliance: religion, education, pursuits, modes of living, association, property, speculative views; then proceeded to number four of these, redistributing the others somehow.

In regard to the more mechanical aspect of the essays, it may be

1. *Friendship*.

2. *Experience*.

3. *Circles*.

added that Emerson sometimes refined and laboured to a point of excessiveness either prettily, with a flimsy thought or two : " Dear Friend, If I was sure of thee, sure of thy capacity, sure to match my mood with thine, I should never think again of trifles in relation to thy comings and goings. I am not very wise ; my moods are quite attainable and I respect thy genius ; it is to me as yet unfathomed ; yet dare I not presume in thee a perfect intelligence of me, and so thou art to me a delicious torment. Thine ever, or never¹ ; » or with generalities, marking time until constructive thought returns to him : " One man's justice is another's injustice ; one man's beauty another's ugliness ; one man's wisdom another's folly ; as one beholds the same object from a higher point. One man thinks justice consists in paying debts, and has no measure in his abhorrence of another who is very remiss in this duty and makes the creditor wait tediously. But that second man has his own way of looking at things²... "

Then we have the deserved reproach that Emerson's conclusions were often lacking or misplaced, ending, as R. L. Stevenson said, " in a foot-note ". The essay *Compensation*, in which polarity or duality is shown at work in all the manifestations of nature because cause and effect are inseparably bound together, ends lamely with symbolical imagery, but no arresting and stimulating thought : " The death of a dear friend... permits or constrains the formation of new acquaintances and the reception of new influences that prove of the first importance to the next years ; and the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden-flower, with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener is made the banyan of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men. " The whole paragraph has more emotional force than most of the others in the essay, but it provides no climax and could have been placed almost anywhere else.

Critics have harped on Emerson's lack of continuity. Perhaps rightly so, if we consider the art of transition, — that is, the lucid exposition of ideas in order of sequence, — as an indispensable element of good style. This is what Matthew Arnold meant when he said that Emerson's style " wants the requisite wholeness of good tissue ". The fact is that Emerson the lecturer felt somewhat supe-

1. *Friendship*.

2. *Circles*.

prior to the technicalities of organized composition. "Can you tell me", asked one member of his audience, "what connection there is between that last sentence and the one that went before, and what connection it all has with Plato?" "None, my friend", replied Emerson, "save in God". Has Emerson not also proclaimed that "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds", and also, referring to himself, "The man Fingal... works more in the spirit of a cabinet maker than of an architect"? Was there a deliberate intent on his part to compose disjointed paragraphs? "If you desire to arrest attention, to surprise, do not give me facts in the order of cause and effect, but drop one or two links in the chain, and give me a cause, an effect two or three times removed¹." Emerson's editors tell us that it was his method in his lectures "to keep attention on the stretch and give the hearer the creative pleasure of supplying the link²". He seems to have also employed this method in his *Essays*. The passage cited below is followed by an outline of its leading ideas, together with the missing "links": "We are all discerners of spirits. That diagnosis lies aloft in our life or unconscious power. The intercourse of society, its trade, its religion, its friendships, its quarrels, is one wide judicial investigation of character. In full court, or in small committee, or confronted face to face, accuser and accused, men offer themselves to be judged. Against their will they exhibit those decisive trifles by which character is read. But who judges? and what? Not our understanding. We do not read them by learning or craft. No; the wisdom of the wise man consists herein, that he does not judge them; he lets them judge themselves and merely reads and records their own verdict³."

In other words: Men are capable of understanding spiritual values because they possess an unconscious power (Supply the link: that power is character.) Life is a test of character (Supply the link: in order to determine the worth of character). Trial is expected by all men, and unconsciously they betray their character. But neither intelligence nor knowledge is their judge. (Supply the link: the judge is the wise man). This man is wise in that he lets men judge themselves. (Supply the link: for all can judge themselves, since they possess the power to grasp spiritual values.) Of course, to understand the argument fully, one must remember that all

1. *Journals*. September, 1838.

2. J. E. W. Emerson and W. E. Forbes. *Emerson*, p. 645.

3. *The Oversoul*.

things being moral in Emerson's eyes, character depends on spiritual values.

That this obscure, cryptic way of writing did not prove entirely satisfactory to the author himself, one may surmise in reading his *Journal*: "If Minerva offered me a gift and an option, I would say, give me continuity."

"The choice and command of language", say Gibbon, "is the fruit of exercise". The final aim of style is precision as well as art. Do the writings of Emerson give, as time progresses, evidence of improvement in these respects? During his life time the American language was undergoing morphological changes. Webster's first public edition of his dictionary dates as far back as 1828. Mark Twain, in *The Stolen White Elephant*, declares: "When I speak my native tongue in its utmost purity in England, an Englishman can't understand me." Emerson, on his visits there, speaks of no such difficulty, for he is one of those who held against too drastic linguistic changes. Furthermore, Louis Untermeyer in *Whitman and the American Language* claims for the latter the title of "father of the American language"; and Whitman post-dates Emerson. Was there a progression from the *Journals* to the *Essays*? O. W. Firkins finds the former more "readable" than the latter. One thing is fairly evident: the superiority of the *Journals* on the side of fluency and vigour, for in them Emerson was writing for himself alone and could afford to be natural. In his essay, *Experience*, we have: "... for practical success, there must not be too much design. A man will not be observed in doing that which he can do best. There is a certain magic about his properest action which stupefies your powers of observation, so that though it is done before you, you wist not of it. The art of life has a pudency and will not be exposed. Every man is an impossibility until he is born; everything impossible until we see it a success. The ardors of piety agree at last with the coldest skepticism — that nothing is of us or our works, — that all is of God. Nature will not spare us the smallest leaf of laurel. All writing comes by the grace of God, and all doing is having." And in the *Journals*, July, 1841:

"We all know enough to be endless writers. Those who have written best are not those who have known most, but those to whom writing was natural and necessary... Let us answer a book of ink with a book of flesh and blood. All writing comes by the grace of God." If the *Journals* had constituted the progressive recordings of Emerson's thoughts in draft form, one should be

able to observe a line of cleavage between his prose works from 1860 — when he wrote his *Conduct of Life* — and those before that date, since he ceased to keep his *Journals* in 1859. But no such change is observable, for his compositions were done without regard to the time element, as we have already explained.

The evolution of the *Essays* proper is again a matter open for discussion. Although formed from material often gathered at a fairly early age, they were published in 1841 and 1844 and can be considered a product of the author's maturity. They all possess a certain seriousness and earnestness of outlook, are morally exhortative, and similar in that each and every one is explanatory of his peculiar philosophy.

Coltish attempts at composition, occasioned by an imperfectly assimilated vocabulary, occur in his early *Journals*. One would search in vain in the *Essays* for passages such as this, which recall to mind the witches' scene in *Macbeth*: "O ye witches assist me! enliven or horrify some midnight lucubration or dream (whichever may be found most convenient) to supply this reservoir when other resources fail. Pardon me, Fairy Land! rich region of fancy and gnomery, elvery, sylphery, and Queen Mab! pardon me for presenting my first petition to your enemies, but there is probably one in the chamber who maliciously influenced me to what is irrevocable, pardon and favour me! And finally, Spirits of Earth, Air, Fire, Water, wherever you glow, whatsoever you patronize, whoever you inspire, hallow, hallow this devoted paper. Dedicated and signed January 25, 1820. Junio". This is Emerson at the age of sixteen.

It has been noted that the pure or abstract essays are of looser fabric than those strongly tinged with concrete or practical import. The essay on *History* and that on *Compensation* are proof of the effect of subject matter on form: the former with its abstractions and loose pattern: the latter, of concrete, practical import and closely developed sequence.

If we take his first publication, *Nature*, in 1836; *English Traits*, in 1856; and *Letters and Social Aims*, in 1875, — each written about twenty years apart, we may be able to ascertain whether there was marked progression discernible.

The first certainly reveals a fair structural organization. Its chief divisions, Commodity, Beauty, Language, Discipline, fall themselves into numbered subdivisions. Realism forcibly expressed in homely, every-day images and enumerations has the greatest frequency in it. Next come philosophical disquisitions, with a

decided under-current of moralizing. It contains several passages of rather fine poetic prose, to which the subject quite naturally lends itself: "The leafless trees become spires of flame in the sunset, with the blue east for their background, and the stars of the dead calices of flowers, and every withered stem and stubble rimed with frost, contribute something to the mute music..." The conclusion is climatic and possesses a biblical simplicity of utterance which must have come readily enough to the pen of the young man who had so recently renounced the pulpit.

English Traits are made up of a collection of popular lectures given by Emerson. It is evident here that the author had been impressed by England, for whom he preserved a filial love, and vicariously shared in her glory past and present. When lecturing in that country he had even once caught himself exclaiming "We English..." The unity of these essays comes from their paeon-like quality. A great deal of intemperance of language is to be noted as well as assertiveness, even vehemence, at the expense of those not born in the fortunate isles. There is also much more irony than is customary with Emerson. Keen observation livens almost every paragraph. Factual information as well as a wealth of historical data create an almost overwhelming impression of encyclopedic erudition. Transitions become merely anecdotes and personal reactions. On the whole this work, whilst exhibiting much forcefulness and pictorial ability, is lacking in the qualities required of sustained writing: coherence, organization, artistic skill, and objectivity. In contrast with *Representative Men*, published five years before, it almost shows a lowering of standards, especially in depth and development of thought. For once Emerson did not bring his philosophy to bear upon subject matter and give it his own original stamp.

In *Letters and Social Aims*, however, the fragmenting of the volume into self-contained and self-sufficient topics results in greater organic density, though organization goes by the board. It seems that Emerson was fated to exercise his talent best in the shorter pieces. In *Poetry and Imagination*, the first essay in this collection, erudition receives due space, though less than heretofore. A certain rhythmical alternation of realistic and metaphysical passages, with the gradual encroachment of the latter, impresses the reader. Dogmatic asseverations assume an important part in the discourse. One feels that the Sage of Concord, having earned the right to dogmatize, is indulging in a rather superior soliloquy about all things pertaining to the Universe.

To summarize the present chapter, it may be stated that organically Emerson's style reveals characteristics common to his New England origin. In addition, there is a cryptic quality in his prose, due partly to the fact that it was formed from material taken from the *Journals* without regard to time sequence. This material was first used in the compositions of the Lectures; and the oratorical nature of the latter, tending as they do to stress emotional rather than logical construction, often produced an impression of inconsistency. Poorly managed transitions, frequent lack of conclusion, further accentuate the foibles.

The evolution of Emerson's style is not evident. If we neglect his very youthful attempts, we must admit that no great progression can be traced in his prose, for that prose is the fruit of his maturity. More looseness in the abstract essays than in those of practical import can, however, be perceived. If one studies three of his productions, taken from periods twenty years apart, one finds more restraint and earnestness, more organization in the earliest ones; rather the reverse in the second group; and in the third group more oracular serenity and plenitude of thought, together with more striving after effect through literary devices. This might perhaps be regarded as a natural development, if not a progression, since the style of the earliest essays may reflect the moods of a new writer eager to convince; the second group may reveal the outlook of one experienced in the art of effective exposition; and the third group the mellowness of old age. Yet there are varied aspects of his style found in other essays, some even in the same paragraph. One must therefore conclude that the paramount quality of Emerson's composition was versatility, which minimizes the value of any clear-cut criticism of the evolution of his style.

V

EMERSONISM

"Emersonianism today is a sign of limitation, not of strength; of palsy, not of growth. I say Emersonianism, meaning the influence of Emerson as it works on large masses of men¹."

Let us call *Emersonism* the most apparent quality of style in the work of our author. The quality we refer to, very aptly termed "the Emersonian mosaic of apothegms²", belongs pre-eminently to the author by reason of its unmistakable assertiveness.

This mode of expression is also characteristic of the American people, who have a pronounced fondness for worldly wisdom, or the semblance of it, and direct injunction, compressed into elliptical form. A glance at the advertising columns of a newspaper, at the notices displayed on the walls of almost any business office, will convince us of that: "Time is Money"; "The first hundred years are the hardest"; "Nothing succeeds like success"; "Do it now"; "Be brief, our time is precious, so is yours"; "Go West, young man". Mencken says that the taste for "such canned sagacity" seems to have arisen in America at a very early date.

That this style was well adapted to the energetic, dynamic race which is ever eager to transform its thinking into acts — even if injudicious — is proved by its ready adoption and the test of years. First we see that the "Proverbial philosophy" of Martin Farquhar Tupper, dawning upon the American public in the early 40's, was welcomed with enthusiasm³"; that "Benjamin Franklin's 'Poor Richard's Almanac', begun in 1732, remained a great success for twenty-five years, and the annual sales reached 10,000³"; and of

1. P. E. More. *Shelburne Essays*, p. 72.

2. H. S. Canby. *Classic Americans*, p. 152.

3. H. L. Mencken. *American Language*, p. 423.

course " 'Poor Richard's Almanac' had many imitators and formed an aphoristic style of writing which culminated in the essays of Emerson¹ ". " 'Proverbial Philosophy' is the last and perhaps the only importation of the sage and mellifluous in bulk. In late years the American production of such merchandise has grown so large that the balance of trade now flows in the other direction¹. " What England gave, America now returned with interest : " The American literature of ' inspirational' platitude is enormous and almost unique². " " No people, save perhaps the Spaniards, have a richer store of proverbial wisdom than the Americans². "

Emerson easily became a leader in this field ; first because he had developed to a great degree the type of positive assertion which requires no demonstration but is carried by its own forcefulness and inclusiveness, which might be defined as synthesis without analysis. " What made Emerson's teaching take hold of his contemporaries... is just its unfailingly positive character³". A random gleaming among his works will supply us at once with a goodly crop of such assertions : " Fear always springs from ignorance⁴ " ; " The Arts and Sciences are the only cosmopolites⁵ " ; " Every hero becomes a bore at last⁶ " ; " Scepticism is slow suicide⁷ ; " " Imagination respects the Cause⁸ " ; " Time and patience change a mulberry leaf into satin⁹ " ; " The human mind cannot be burned nor bayoneted, nor wounded, nor missing¹⁰ ". His short phrases became widely popular.

In the second place, Emerson managed to create the impression that he was " a seer, a kind of lay preacher to the world¹¹ ". From such a one utmost clarity is not absolutely required ; a certain vagueness with a potentiality for far-reaching portents is even judicious. Thanks to it, profundity and vacuity form a convenient blend. Again let us quote a few random examples : " Nature is a

1. H. L. Mencken. *American Language*, p. 423.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 422.

3. Stuart P. Sherman. *Americans*, p. 94.

4. *The American Scholar*.

5. *Journals*, December 12, 1835.

6. *Representative Men ; Uses of Great Men*.

7. *Self-Reliance*.

8. *Letters and Social Aims ; Poetry and Imagination*

9. *Journals*, December 23, 1834.

10. *Journals*, February, 1863.

11. P. E. More.

silent man¹”; “God in us worships God²”; “Life consists in what man is thinking of all day³”; “Men hold themselves cheap and vile; and yet a man is a Fagot of Thunderbolts⁴”; “Nothing is more simple than Greatness; indeed to be simple is to be great⁵”; “Whilst one man by his manners pins me to the wall, with another I walk among the stars⁶!”; “An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man⁷”. Characteristically Emersonian is the famous proclamation “Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind”, which is a bold claim to kinship with the essence of the Universe. And typically American are such modern phrases as “Be in tune with the infinite”, which churches often use to advertise nowadays their spiritual wares. It is not unusual to see a quotation from Emerson on the outside of Protestant churches, a quotation designed to attract the passerby into the interior of the building.

Emerson’s lay preaching, so easily remembered for its conciseness, was hailed with delight on all sides because, in the third place, it was dynamic, had “punch”, and above all had its roots in unlimited optimism. The untold possibilities offered to the citizens of a new, hitherto unexploited land, the gospel of tremendous latent energy, the hymn of “rugged individualism” — even if privately Emerson frowned upon it — all these elements appealed to the young nation: “The perpetual admonition of nature to us is ‘The world is new, untried. Do not believe the past. I give you the universe, a virgin today’⁸”. “Let the soul be erect and all things will go well. You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance⁹.” “America is a garden of plenty. Here is bread, and wealth, and power, and education for every man who has the heart to use his opportunity¹⁰.” “What a new face courage puts on everything! A determined man, by his very attitude and the tone of his voice, puts a stop to defeat and begins to

1. *Journals*. September 28, 1844.

2. *Journals*. July 15, 1831.

3. *Journals*. August, 1847.

4. *Conduct of Life; Beauty*.

5. *Literary Ethics*.

6. *Social Aims*.

7. *Self-Reliance*.

8. *Literary Ethics*.

9. *The Transcendentalist*.

10. *Resources*.

conquer¹. " " He has not learned the lesson of life who does not every day surmount a fear². "

These exhortations to a greater good, to active manliness; these short cuts to learning, these ready-made thoughts, so unhesitatingly accepted because they ring so true and because they gratify the ego, have ever since supplied all the "Babbitts", all the Rotarians, Elks, Y. M. C. A.'s, and numerous other social organizations with cheerful slogans and mottoes of strong inspirational type.

Even in the present day, some are experimenting with the Emersonian formula. Pulpiteers and politicians will in all likelihood continue to do so, for the public craves such products: "There are half a dozen authors, e. g. Dr. Orison Sweet Marden and Dr. Frank Crane, who devote themselves, almost exclusively, and to vast profit, to the composition of arresting and uplifting apothegms³. "

Because of the prevalence of what Mencken terms "canned sagacity", because of the too obvious aphorisms, we find ourselves agreeing with the critic who said that "Emersonianism today is a sign of limitation". The Emersonian manner is bad when it outdoes itself in asseverations, when it tends to popularize its message, when it shrieks from the housetops. The blatant aspect of this style has been repeatedly impeached for its superficial thinking and its misguiding philosophy. According to N. T. Adams, it denotes "a shallow optimism which fails us as we grow older and wiser, a fatally easy philosophy, aphorisms which stir the soul of the young and the not too thoughtful, a culture a bit thin and puerile, a man lacking in depth and virility⁴".

We are faced here with the problem of why Emerson, who did not write for the masses, who disliked the masses, had such great success with the masses. It was not his personality that created enthusiasm. As a matter of fact, Emerson achieved no great popularity in his own time. Much to the contrary, we are told that even though today he is in high esteem, "It is difficult for us to remember that for decades the very name Emerson was a newspaper joke, a synonym for absurdity and obscurity of thought⁵. " It is

1. *Resources*.

2. *Society and Solitude, Courage*.

3. H. L. Mencken. *American Language*, p. 423.

4. Quoted by Bliss Perry from an article in the *Atlantic Monthly* of October, 1930. by James Truslow Adams.

5. Bliss Perry. *Emerson to-day*, p. 116.

believed that precisely what is most open to criticism in Emerson's manner of writing had remained floating on the surface like so much dross, while the real, the recondite, the obscure, was sinking into temporary oblivion. Democracy took its revenge on him by lauding what he never would have esteemed himself; but such was the penalty for brilliance and discontinuity.

"Quotable quotes", as they are popularly named, are great favorites with the American people; and none, with the exception of Benjamin Franklin, has provided, unwittingly or not, so many phrases as Emerson — phrases which have become household slogans. His aphorisms are for the most part original, whereas Franklin often worked over already existing sayings. After all, it is a distinction to have created a large proportion of the best known sayings in the American language, such as "All mankind loves a lover"; "Hitch your wagon to a star"; "Goodbye, proud world! am going home". People in America may not know the first of the two following lines, nor who wrote them; but few there are who are ignorant of the second:

Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard round the world¹.

A handful of hackneyed sentences such as these are seldom ascribed to Emerson, yet are universally used: "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm"²; "I admire answers to which no answer is made"³; "He that rides his hobby gently must always give way to him that rides his hobby hard"⁴; "Beauty is the mark God sets on virtue"⁵; "The bodies of intemperate men are the tombs of immortal minds"⁶; "Railroads make the country transparent"⁷; "Tis the good reader that makes the good book"⁸; "To be great is to be misunderstood"⁹; "The only way to make a friend is to be one"¹⁰.

1. Hymn sung at the completion of the Concord monument.

2. *On Circles*.

3. *Journals*. May, 1853.

4. *Journals*. May 11, 1832.

5. *Nature; Beauty*.

6. *Journals*, January 19, 1827.

7. *Journals*. January 30, 1844.

8. *Society and Solitude; Success*.

9. *Self-Reliance*.

10. *Friendship*.

Is it a merit to have credited to oneself such sentences as these? Emerson thinks so; for even if one is not entirely original, to give a markedly quotable turn to an idea is to lengthen its lease on life: "Next to the originator of a good sentence is the first quoter of it¹."

Many of Emerson's apothegms, having emerged from the promiscuousness of conversational truisms, have achieved the distinction of being accepted by world literatures. For example: "A sect or a party is an elegant incognito to save a man from the vexation of thinking²."

Even when one of his detached sentences is not proverbial, does not find instant favour with the multitude, it may still have the Emersonian quality, that "unique personal quality... which tends to isolate him from the other men of his period³". That is, the metaphor, — or imperious need for imagery which manifests itself in several different ways in his writings, either in word units or in sentences: "And so we left Ocean-Rome" (Venice)⁴; "Every man finds room in his face for all his ancestors. Every face an Atrium⁵"; "The gates of thought, — how slow and late they discover themselves! Yet when they appear, we see that they were always there, always open⁶"; "We have little control over our thoughts. We are pensioners upon Ideas⁷"; "Every hour has its morning, noon and night⁸"; "Melancholy cleaves to the Saxon mind as closely as to the tones of an Aeolian harp⁹".

The excessive use of metaphors, which became even more frequent when the author identified himself with Transcendentalism, is so pronounced in his style that Firkins considers it "the stronghold of Emerson... He had declared in the first of his published works, (*Nature*, I, 32) that the whole of nature is but a metaphor of the human mind... Metaphor was to him... the dialect of revelation. The power of Swedenborg lay mainly in the fact that he had discerned its sacredness; the witchery of Shakespeare dwelt largely in his

1. *Quotations and Originality*.

2. Quoted by H. S. Canby in *Classic Americans*, p. 168.

3. Bliss Perry. *Emerson to-day*.

4. *Journals*, 1833.

5. *Journals*, January 13, 1850.

6. *Journals*. April, 1842.

7. *Intellect*.

8. *Journals*. September 17, 1840.

9. *Journals*. November 14, 1835.

divination of its grace... In his double and equal love of rude plainness and prodigal magnificence, in his power to derive metaphors from both, Emerson was a true scion or apt scholar of the Elizabethans¹". If we are to believe a critic, we find that metaphors were necessary to his creative thinking : "... like Carlyle, he literally could not think without metaphor²...". "... About both Emerson and Carlyle a popular tradition has grown up that they are obscure. There are two main reasons for this idea : first the strongly idiosyncratic idiom of both, and second, their addiction to metaphor³. "

Unexplained paradox is likewise the mark of Emersonism. " Good men must not obey the laws too well "; " I do not love to be punctual because I love to be punctual⁴ ".

Wit is another characteristic of Emersonism. In *Self Reliance* he humorously deplores the fact that " All men plume themselves on the improvement of society; and no man improves "; and he wonders "... Every stoic was a stoic; but in Christendom where is the Christian? " For all his seriousness, he was witty and not loath to show it. Americans have a marked sense of humor. We may not agree with the following remark, but it states the case, albeit with bias : " All the world knows that the Americans are a humorous people as conspicuously the purveyors of humor to the nineteenth century as the French were the purveyors of wit to the eighteenth century⁵ ". Emerson himself has said that " The absence of entertainment is a defect ", and that " The command of humor is one of the marks of a constructive intellect ". Irony is often detected in the most sedate or matter-of-fact passages of American authors. Mencken affirms that it is an " American habit to combat the disagreeable with irony⁶. In Emerson, irony is frequent; even a lack of gravity where it is least expected. " A certain levity, almost a frivolity, which he exhibits now and then in the presence of creeds, churches, pious organizations, is actually the consequence of his entire reverence in the presence of every unmistakable manifestation of spiritual life⁷. " In *Spiritual Laws*, he pokes fun at New

1. O. W. Firkins. *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, p. 255.

2. R. M. Gay. *Emerson, the Poet and Seer*, p. 483.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 484.

4. *Journals*. July 10, 1828.

5. Bryce. *The American Commonwealth*.

6. H. L. Mencken. *American Language*, p. 191.

7. Stuart P. Sherman. *Americans*, p. 83.

England reformers and "joiners": "Nature will not have us fret and fume. She does not like our benevolence or our learning much better than she likes our frauds and wars. When we come out of the caucus, or the bank, or the Abolition-convention, or the Temperance-meeting, or the Transcendental club into the fields and woods, she says to us. 'So hot? my little Sir!'" In his essay on *History*, he turns the shafts of irony upon the merchants and culture seekers of Boston Bay: "The nomads of Africa were constrained to wander, by the attacks of the gad-fly, which drives the cattle mad... In America and Europe the nomadism is of trade and curiosity; a progress, certainly, from the gad-fly of Astaboras to the Anglo and Italo-mania of Boston Bay."

Usually the form Emersonian wit or humor is in the nature of the epigram. "Emerson's style is brilliant, epigrammatic, gem-like¹." Here are some typical examples of his epigrammatic wit: "In this world if a man sits down to think, he is immediately asked if he has the headache." "Doctor Ripley prays for rain with great explicitness on Sunday, and on Monday the showers fell. When I spoke of the speed with which his prayers were answered, the good man looked modest." "There is Webster, but he cannot do what he would; he cannot do Webster." "The man Mc Clellan ebbed liked a sea." "I saw a maiden so pure that she exchanged glances only with the stars." "Old age. An indignation meeting proposed." Occasionally the epigram strikes a melancholy note: "We do not count a man's years until he has nothing else to count". "Life is the sleep of the soul: as soon as the soul is tired, it looks out for a body as a bed; enters into a body in the season of dentition, and sleeps seventy years."

"Emersonism", as we have seen, is applied to the very peculiar form of the author's style that can be detached from the context, and which is enjoying great vogue in America. It is essentially proverbial philosophy. The characteristics of this type of writing are positiveness, lay-preaching, dynamic optimism. The easy adaptation of Emerson's aphorisms resulted in making him one of the most widely quoted among American writers. The metaphor supplies the foundation to most of these household sayings. Paradoxes and witticisms, particularly epigrammatic witticisms, are likewise plentiful in them.

The chief distinction to be emphasized is between "Emersonism"

1. *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

or the most obvious manner of Emerson, and his deeper, more earnest style used as a vehicle for his transcendental thought. The former is essentially dynamic, and its swiftness and brevity of thought contrasts with the depth and richness of thought revealed in the latter. Emersonian, by no means transcendental, is the following passage taken from the *Journals*. Here is writing that is quaint and virile, compressed almost to a fault, with imagery as its keynote : " I noticed a little boy in the company whose speech in talking with his mates never went out as a mendicant from him, engaging him to what was said, but he remained quite entire when his speech was gone. So will it be when he is a man. "

VI

ETHICAL STYLE OF EMERSON

Emerson was essentially a moral man, — moral in his conduct no doubt, but also in his speech; and moral in his conception of the world around him. Apart from the home atmosphere, which, owing to the unbroken line of clerical forbears, must have been heavily laden with morality, his times were particularly conducive to ethical considerations. "To the Bostonians of the 20's and 40's, speculation upon conduct was as natural as breathing¹." Against the wave of materialistic progress a great moral movement was forming, which was an extension of Puritanism. It was an outgrowth of religion, but of religion no longer obsessed with narrow questions of doctrine. Of this new type of religion, a writer aptly said, "It is something more than a philosophy; it is a form of social behavior²". Emerson has been called the Dionysos of this new movement. How did he fit himself for his role? Probably by gathering in his arguments, by sifting the elements of his philosophy. One is tempted to consider the *Journals* as the rough drafts, the preliminary attempts at formulating the great truths that he felt stirring within him. The following passage from *The American Scholar* is reminiscent of a past mental discipline, willingly accepted until the maturing of his mind and its consequent effect upon his power of expression :

I have now spoken of the education of the scholar by nature, by books, and by action. It remains to say somewhat of his duties.

They are such as become Man Thinking. They may all be comprised in self-trust. The office of the scholar is to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances. He plies the slow, unhonoured, and unpaid task of observation. Flamsteed and Herschel, in their glazed observatories, may catalogue the stars with the praise of all men and, the results being splendid and useful, honour is sure. But he,

1. H. S. Canby. *Classic Americans*, p. 147.

2. Shailer Matthews. *Creative Christianity*, pp. 130-31.

in his private observatory, cataloguing obscure and nebulous stars of the human mind, which as yet no man has thought of as such; watching days and months, sometimes, for a few facts; correcting still his old records; must relinquish display and immediate fame.

In the long periods of his preparation, he must betray often an ignorance and shiftlessness in popular arts, incurring the disdain of the able who shoulder him aside. Long he must stammer in his speech; often forego the living for the dead. Worse yet, he must accept, how often! poverty and solitude...

If there is such a thing as a Puritanic style, Emerson seems to have come by it very naturally. "It is written, because it is thus in life... We aim at a petty end quite aside from the public good... A man cannot speak but he judges himself... You cannot do wrong without suffering wrong... Treat men as pawns and ninepins and you shall suffer as well as they. If you leave out their hearts, you shall lose yours also¹." "Let... a heart as great, self-sufficing, dauntless, which on the waves of its love and hope can uplift all that is reckoned solid and precious in the world, — palaces, gardens, money, navies, kingdoms, — making its own incomparable worth by the slight it casts on these gauds of men; — these are all his, and by the power of these he rouses the nations. Let a man believe in God, and not in names and places and persons²."

It is clear that Emerson's position was that of a reformer, a seer, an exponent of the "better life". He had little patience with the professional language of preachers. "I hate goodies. I hate goodness that preaches", he said. But for all that his ministerial calling had left its mark upon his speech. Bible-bred and Bible-loving, he knew how to revert on occasions to the orceful simplicity of scriptural appeal: "But I see the meanness of this illustration: let me offer a better. He will be like the hand of Christ which touched the rolling eyeball, and it saw, which touched the paralytic and he was made whole; yea, and was laid upon dead bones and they started up again into human life and praised God. He will be a freeman whom the truth has made free, and will put the whole compass of all his reading and all his experience under contribution to convey proofs of God's being and Providence into the mind of his pupil. Nobody doubts, I suppose, that this can be done. Every chip and sea weed contributes its part to the gravity

1. *Essays. Compensation.*

2. *Essays. Spiritual Laws.*

of the system, and every object in the universe, every truth bears testimony to God¹. ”

A clerical upbringing usually insures to an earnest-minded youth a poise and a restraint, both in attitude and formality of expression, unmistakable in newly inducted clerics. The following passage, composed by Emerson at the age of twenty-nine, at the close of his brief pastorate, may be cited as an example of professional austerity : “ What I revere and obey is its reality, its boundless charity, its deep interior life, the rest it gives to mind, the echo it returns to my thoughts, the perfect accord it makes with my reason through all its representation of God and his Providence; and the persuasion and courage that come out thence to lead me upward and onward. Freedom is the essence of this faith. It has for its object simply to make men good and wise. Its institutions then should be as flexible as the wants of men. That form out of which the life and suitableness have departed should be as worthless in its eyes as the dead leaves that are falling around us². ” Later on, of course, Emerson became less subdued in the voicing of his sentiments.

To appeal to him, anything — either spoken or written — had to possess a measure of ethical value. So with authors. Goethe, whom he regarded as deficient in the moral values, although he admired him, he dismissed summarily from his mind, with a “ Let him pass³ ”.

Not merely moral suasion, but far more, moral obligation, knits his writing together. “ *Ought* and *is* ”, says Canby, “ are the prevailing words of his work ”. Carlyle called Emerson “ the cleanest mind now living. ” The style of Emerson is made weighty by its density of moral thought. He seemed to think ethically. “ All things are moral. The soul which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law... Justice is not postponed... The dice of God are always loaded⁴. ” “ A man is the façade of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide⁵. ” “ Character is this moral order seen through the medium of an individual nature⁶. ” “ Mr. Frederic Harrison has coined the word Ethicism. Emerson was an Ethic-

1. *Journals*, 1832.

2. *The Lord's Supper*.

3. *Papers from the Dial. Thoughts on Modern Literature*.

4. *Compensation*.

5. *The Oversoul*.

6. *Character*.

cist¹." Here is a typical example of Emerson's "Ethicism" and its peculiarity of style :

One Key, one solution to the mysteries of human condition, one solution to the old knots of fate, freedom and foreknowledge, exists, the propounding, namely, of the double consciousness. A man must ride alternately on the horses of his private and public nature, as the equestrians in the circus throw themselves nimbly from horse to horse, or plant one foot on the back of one, and the other foot on the back of the other. So when a man is the victim of his fate, has sciatica in his loins, and cramp in his mind ; a club-foot, and a club in his wit ; a sour face, and a selfish temper ; a strut in his gait, and a conceit in his affection ; or is ground to powder by the vice of his race ; he is to rally on his relation to the Universe, which his ruin benefits. Leaving the demon who suffers, he is to take sides with the Deity, who secures universal benefit by his pain².

Courage has been cited as one of Emerson's attributes that are best revealed by his style. Of him and of Carlyle, we read in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, "The things that each admired in the other were self-reliance, directness, moral courage. Let us quote again from the Lord's Supper :

My brethren have considered my views with patience and candor, and have recommended, unanimously, an adherence to the present form. I have therefore been compelled to consider whether it becomes me to administer it. I am clearly of opinion I ought not.

This discourse has already been so far extended that I can only say that the reason of my determination is shortly this : It is my desire, in the office of a Christian minister, to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart. Having said this, I have said all. I have no hostility to this institution ; I am only stating my want of sympathy with it. Neither should I ever have obtruded this opinion upon other people, had I not been called by my office to administer it. That is the end of my opposition, that I am not interested in it. I am content that it stand to the end of the world, if it please men and please Heaven, and I shall rejoice in all the good it produces.

As it is the prevailing opinion and feeling in our religious community, that it is an indispensable part of the pastoral office to administer this ordinance, I am about to resign into your hands that office which you have confided to me. It has many duties for which I am but feebly qualified. It has some which it will always be my delight to discharge according to my ability, wherever I exist. And whilst the recollection of its claims oppresses me with a sense of my unworthiness, I am consoled by the hope that no time and no change can deprive me of the satisfaction of pursuing and exercising its highest functions³.

1. *Addresses and Essays of Emerson*. Introduction, p. 6.

2. *The Conduct of Life : Fate*.

3. *The Lord's Supper*.

This expresses well the courage and severe dignity, the directness of expression, of the impecunious minister thus renouncing his only means of livelihood. He had at that time little expectation of thriving with his pen. The absence of bitterness speaks well for his disinterestedness and high sense of moral values. One is likewise convinced by it that, although he is forsaking the cloth, Emerson remains at heart a preacher, a fact borne out by his subsequent writings.

Another concomitant of this virtue of courage is virility. The style of Emerson's prose has an uncompromising quality. « Suppose you should contradict yourself; what then?... Speak what you think now in hard words and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again; though it contradict everything you said to-day. — 'Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood'. Is it so bad to be misunderstood?... To be great is to be misunderstood¹. »
 « For the rest, I like to see that we cannot be bought and sold². »

Character, moral character, is all the more marked in Emerson's style because he draws its vitality from spiritual forces. He would have us esteem man in proportion to his possession of moral qualities :

A man is the face of a temple wherein all wisdom and all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresent himself. Him we do not respect, but the soul, whose organ he is, would he let it appear through his action, would make our knees bend. When it breaks through his will, it is virtue; when it flows through his affections, it is love. And the blindness of the intellect begins when it would be something of itself. The weakness of the will begins when the individual would be something of himself³.

To Emerson, a formula for good writing must be found in daring to say what one feels honestly and without reticence. He says in his Journal: " Did I read somewhere lately that the sum of virtue was to know and dare? The analogy is always perfect between virtue and genius. One is ethical, the other intellectual creation. The way to avoid mannerism, the way to write what shall not go out of fashion, is to write sincerely, to transcribe your doubt or regret or whatever state of mind without the airs of a fine gentleman or great philosopher, without timidity or display, just as they lie in your consciousness, casting on God the responsibility of the facts. This is to dare. "

1. *Self-Reliance*.

2. *Gifts*.

3. *The Oversoul*.

Finally, the moral style of our author is exhortative: "The world exists for the education of each man... He should see that he can live all history in his own person. He must sit solidly at home, and not suffer himself to be bullied by kings or empires, but know that he is greater than all the geography and all the governments of the world¹." "To believe your own thoughts is to believe that what is true in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense... Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string." "Trust men and they will be true to you; treat them greatly and they will show themselves great."

Emerson, essentially a moral man, morally nurtured, morally educated, and morally trained, having identified himself with the great ethical movement then battling against the materialistic concerns of the times, went even further in sponsoring the spiritual cause. He fitted himself for his task, and although he renounced the pulpit, he still retained to a considerable extent the forms of speech of the minister of God. Gravity and restraint he learned. His style grew out of the very form of those moral thoughts ever dominant in his mind. "Ethicism" best describes this style. Its outstanding attributes are courage, virility, independence, all of which proclaim character. Translating itself into the language of action, it yielded that last and significant characteristic, the exhortative tendency, without which it might have remained ineffectual. This moral style of Emerson served his two most powerful urges: that of appealing to the better nature of man, — and here it merges with his oratorical style; and that of convincing man of the omnipresence of God, — and here it merges with his metaphysical style. Even those of his works which are of a more intellectual quality will be affected by the moral preoccupation of the man. He firmly believed that intellectual manifestations, to be of any value whatsoever, must be grounded on ethical principles. "Do you see what we preserve of History? A few anecdotes of a moral quality of some momentary act or word²." "I think the whole use in literature is the moral³." "... The high poetry of the world from the beginning has been ethical³." "There can be no high culture without morals³."

1. *History*.

2. *History*.

3. *Journals*. April, 1847.

VII

INTELLECT AND IMAGINATION

Emerson's language, it has been observed, seems often to have been dictated by an intuitive power of creativeness: "His longing was to be swept away by a mastering inspiration, a Pentecostal wind", says O. W. Firkins, "instead he composes literature even in his journals, and makes two drafts of letters to his private friends". Yet there is no denying that his style often suggests a mood verging on ecstasy or rapture: "Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person who in his integrity worships God, becomes God¹." "Oh Poet!... thou true land-lord! sea-lord! air-lord! Wherever snow falls or water flows or birds fly, wherever day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds or sown with stars, wherever are forms with transparent boundaries, wherever are outlets into celestial space, wherever is danger and awe, and love, — there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee, and though thou shouldst walk the world over, thou shall not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble²." "Nothing is dead: men feign themselves dead and endure mock funerals and mournful obituaries, and there they stand looking out of the window, sound and well, in some new and strange disguise. Jesus is not dead; he is very well alive: nor John, nor Paul, nor Mahomet, nor Aristotle; at times we believe we have seen them all, and could easily tell the names under which they go³."

Yet Emerson at times appears lost in the presence of intellectual undertaking. He says, "What is the hardest task in the world? To think. I would put myself in the attitude to look in the eye an abstract truth and I cannot. I blench and withdraw on this side and on that". This is from his essay on *Intellect*. In *Spiritual Laws*, we

1. *The Oversoul*.

2. *The Poet*.

3. *Nominalist and Realist*.

find " We do not determine what we think... We have little control over our thoughts. We are prisoners of ideas ". This may indeed account for his difficult transitions, his obscurity, and his occasional incoherence, to which we have already referred.

The intellect at work draws upon the imagination. Emerson makes there an important distinction in his essay on *Poetry and Imagination* : " Imagination is central, fancy superficial. " The former we may consider as original and purely intellectual, the latter as imitative and merely literary : " As yet the imaginative vocabulary seems to be spontaneous also. It does not flow from experience only or mainly, but from a richer source¹. "

Picturesque imagery abounds in his work : " Commit a crime and the earth is made of glass². " " Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, predestination and the like... These are the soul's mumps and measles and whooping-coughs...³ " " The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched to the chambers and magazines of the soul⁴. " " But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with the new wine of his imagination, writes me an ode or a brisk romance... He claps wings to the sides of all the solid old lumber of the world⁵. " " The walls of rude minds are scrawled all over with facts, with thoughts. They shall one day bring a lantern and read the inscriptions⁶. " " We were put into our bodies as fire is put into a pan to be carried about⁷. " " We think our civilization near its meridian, but we are yet only at the cock-crowing and the morning star⁸. "

Accumulations of images, each intended to strengthen the mental pictures Emerson wants to evoke, are met with everywhere : " The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle. He has a fine Geneva watch, but he fails of the skill to tell the hour by the sun⁹. " " If the government is cruel, the governor's life is not safe. If you tax too high, the revenue will yield nothing. If you make the criminal code sanguinary, juries will not convict. If the

1. *Intellect.*

2. *Compensation.*

3. *Spiritual Laws.*

4. *The Over-Soul.*

5. *Circles.*

6. *Intellect.*

7. *The Poet.*

8. *Politics.*

9. *Self-Reliance.*

law is too mild, private vengeance comes in¹. ” “ What is odious but noise, and people who scream and bewail? people whose vane points always east, who live to dine, who send for the doctor, who coddle themselves, who toast their feet on the register, who intrigue to secure a padded chair in a corner out of the draught². ”

Juxtapositions of words, where one or two might often suffice, bear testimony to the overflowing of his fervid fancy : “ They will shuffle and crow, crook and hide³. ” “ ... the penalties of abstinence, of debt, of solitude, or unpopularity⁴... ” “ Coarse slander, fire, tar and feathers and the gibbet⁵... ” “ This life of ours is stuck around with Egypt, Greece, Gaul, England, War, Colonization, Church, Court and Commerce⁶. ” “ ... the age of Gold, the apples of Knowledge, the Argonautic Expedition, the calling of Abraham, the building of the Temple, the Advent of Christ, Dark Ages, the Revival of Letters, the Reformation, the discovery of new lands, the opening of new sciences and new regions in man⁷. ” As a rule, the frequency of such cumulative words gives the impression that Emerson is hammering at ideas according to an instinctive rhythm : “ Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but the change is not meliorating. For everything that is given something is taken. Society acquires new arts and loses old instincts. What a contrast between the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil and a bill of exchange in his pocket, and the naked New Zealander whose property is a club, a spear, a mat and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under⁸! ”

This type of writing perhaps indicates a lack of central perception, a weakening dispersion of meaning. In view of the following statement by the author himself, it may even be regarded as condemnatory : “ The virtue of art lies in detachment, in sequestering one object from the embarrassing variety⁹. ”

1. *Compensation.*

2. *Culture.*

3. *Prudence.*

4. *Heroism.*

5. *Heroism.*

6. *History.*

7. *History.*

8. *Self-Reliance.*

9. *Art.*

The same is true of the too-frequent metaphor, which gives an impression of over-eagerness to transform the abstract into the concrete, to give a specious garb to plain truth. This criticism is made only in reference to the superabundance of Emerson's metaphors, many of which are highly artistic: "... our affections are but tents of a night¹". "... the sweet sincerity of joy and peace which I draw from this alliance with my brother's soul is the nut itself whereof all nature and all thought is but the husk and shell²". "... whilst he pitches his tent on this sacred volcanic isle of nature...³". "Crime and punishment grow out of one stem. Punishment is a fruit that unsuspected ripens within the flower of the pleasure which concealed it⁴." "We are the photometers, we the irritable gold leaf and tinfoil that measure the accumulations of the subtle elements⁵..." "... the past restored, but embalmed...⁶". "What drops of all the sea of our science are baled up!⁷" "An unnavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with⁸." "They stand on the brink of the ocean of thought and power⁹..." "We are amphibious creatures, weaponed for two elements, having two sets of faculties, the particular and the catholic¹⁰."

Emerson, unlike most of his illustrious predecessors, took his role of essayist very seriously. Though he was not averse to pleasant bantering, the *Essays* have none of it. The *Journals*, more whimsical, helped him to unbend. This lighter vein can be noted in the following realistic passage, taken from his *Journals*:

The engineer was goading his boilers with pitch-pine knots. The traveller looked out of the car window; the fences passed languidly by; he could scan curiously every post. But very soon the jerk of every pulse of the engine was felt; the whistle of the engineer moaned short moans, as it swept across any highway. He gazed out over the fields; the fences seemed tormented; every rail and rider writhed and twisted past the window; the snowbanks swam past like fishes; and the speed seemed to

1. Love.

2. Friendship.

3. Prudence.

4. Compensation.

5. Spiritual Laws.

6. Intellect.

7. The Poet.

8. Experience.

9. Experience.

10. Nominalist and Realist.

increase at every moment. The near trees and bushes wove themselves into coloured ribbons. The rocks, walls, the fields themselves, streaming like a mill-race. The train tore on with jumps and jerks that tested the strength of oak and iron. The passengers seemed to suffer their speed. Meantime, the wind cried like a child, complained like a sawmill, whistled like a fife, mowed like an idiot, roared like the sea, and yelled like a demon.

It is in the *Journals*, too, that Emerson indulged in the satirical and jocular form of descriptive literature :

What is a passenger? He is a much enduring man who bends under the load of his leisure. He fawns upon the captain, reveres the mate, but his eye follows the steward... The species is contemplative, given to imitate, viciously inquisitive, immensely capable of sleep, large eaters, swift digesters, their thoughts ever running on men and things ashore, and their eye equally squinting over the bulwark to estimate the speed of the bubbles.

Satire, in the *Essays*, eschews levity and is of a higher tone than one finds in the *Journals*. However, homely satire still appears, as in the following passage :

The Englishman speaks with all his body. His elocution is stomachic — as the American is labial. The Englishman is very petulant and precise about his accommodations at inns, and on the roads; a quiddle about his toast and his chop, and every species of convenience, and loud and pungent in expressions of impatience at any neglect. His vivacity betrays itself, at all points, in his manners, in his respiration, and the inarticulate noises he makes in clearing his throat, — all significant of burly strength. He has stamina... He has that *aplomb*, which results from a good adjustment of the moral and physical nature, and the obedience of all powers to the will; as if the axes of the eyes were united to his backbone, and only moved with the trunk...

We have endeavored to show that Emerson's style frequently appeared to be of an inspirational nature, manifesting itself in an ecstatic vein. Organized, deliberate thinking seems foreign to him. His imagination was strong and found expression in picturesque imagery, accumulations and juxtapositions of similes, and metaphors of high frequency — all of which indicate a certain dispersion of thought. Earnest-minded as he was in his *Essays*, he found in his *Journals* an outlet for his humorous sense. In the *Journals*, power of description, which calls into play observation and literary skill, is also quite evident. Versatility of style he did indeed possess.

He also possessed a flair for satire, which is not restricted to the *Journals*.

The fact that he also showed keen interest in purely intellectual productions, that he is often credited with a shrewd literary instinct, will make it difficult to formulate a clear opinion as to his value among the writers of America. The favorite problem of some years ago in American universities, "Should Emerson be considered a man of letters or a philosopher?", has not yet received a very satisfactory solution.

VIII

METAPHYSICAL STYLE OF EMERSON

With moralizing the fashion, spiritualism was bound to come to the fore in the intellectual life of America, and with it all manner of metaphysical problems. Emerson was doubtless beset by them, but his mind was too robust to be perplexed by such concerns. "Our young people are diseased with theological problems... A few strong instincts and a few plain rules suffice us¹." There must be originality in that field as in any other, and a new phraseology he felt was sorely needed: "A minister nowadays is the plainest of prose, the prose of prose²."

It may not be amiss to observe that Emerson, in his pastoral years, and even shortly afterwards, could and did use the "prose of prose" that comes readily to the preachers's lips in stereotyped patter:

"My God, who dost animate and uphold us always on the sea and on land, in the fields, in cities and in lonely places, in our homes, and among strangers, I thank thee that thou hast enlightened and comforted and protected me to this hour. Continue to me thy guard and blessing. May I resist the evil that is without by the good that is within. May I rejoice evermore in the consciousness that it is by thee that I live. May I rejoice in the Divine Power, and be humble. Oh that I might show forth thy gift to me by purity, by love, by un-shrinking industry and unsinking hope and by unconquerable courage. May I be more thine, and so more truly myself every day I live³."

But in later years, — in 1838 for instance, two years after the publication of *Nature*, — his conception of the Divinity has changed, and his language has quite a different strain: "In the wood

1. *Spiritual Laws*.

2. *Journals*. April, 1838.

3. *Journals*. *Before Landing at Boston*, 1833.

God was manifest as he was not in the sermon. In the cathedralled larches the ground-pine crept him, the thrush sung him, the robin complained him, the cat-bird mewed him, the anemone vibrated him, the wild-apple bloomed him⁴...

It was Emerson's ambition to unite again the languages of philosophy and of religion, whose separation he deplored: "Unhappy divorce of Religion and Philosophy!" He makes God the inner cause for all behavior, so that the ultimate term of all his thinking is the deity: "All my opinions, affections, whimsies, are tinged with belief, — incline to that side³." It is not possible for any man's language to be more religious: "I am a better believer and all serious souls are better believers in the immortality than we can give grounds for⁴..."; "God himself does not speak prose, but communicates with us by hints, omens, inferences and dark resemblances in objects lying all around us⁵"; "Eloquence is the best speech of the best Soul⁶"; "Immortality will come to such as are fit for it, and he who would be a great soul in future must be a great soul now⁷"; "Men naturally make a state or a church as caterpillars a web⁸"; "He who loves goodness harbors angels, reveres reverence and lives with God. The less we have to do with our sins the better. No man can afford to waste his moments in compunction⁹"; "The religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative men¹⁰"; "He who does a good deed is instantly ennobled... If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God¹¹". "As the bird alights on the bough, then plunges into the air again, so the thoughts of God pause but for a moment in any form¹²"; "My inference is that there is a statement of religion possible which makes all skepticism absurd¹³".

This philosophical-metaphysical style, when it became welded to

1. *Journal*. May, 1838.

2. *Journal*. November, 1834.

3. *Notes while at Sea*, 1834.

4. *Immortality*.

5. *Poetry and Imagination*.

6. *Eloquence*.

7. *Worship*.

8. *Worship*.

9. *Swedenborg, or the Mystic*.

10. *The Poet*.

11. Address delivered before the Senior class in Divinity College, Cambridge.

12. *Poetry and Imagination*.

13. *The Preacher*.

the plain, forceful language of reality, acquired a tone not unlike that of the Quakers. Emerson himself claimed affinity with that sect : " I believe I am more a Quaker than anything else. I believe in the still small voice and that voice is Christ within us. " We get such passages as these : " What is there of the Divine in a load of bricks? What is there of the Divine in a barber's shop? Much. All¹. " " Write in your heart that every day is the best day in the year. No man has learned anything rightly until he knows that every day is Doomsday². " " The sign is always there, if only the eye were also³. " " Frightful is the solitude of the Soul without God in the world. Chill, houseless, fatherless, aimless Cain, the man who hears only the sound of his own footsteps in God's resplendent creation. To him heaven and earth have lost their beauty⁴. " " The whole world is an omen and a sign. Why look so wistfully in a corner... The voice of divination resounds everywhere and runs to waste unheard, unregarded, as the mountains echo with the bleating of cattle⁵. " " Do not cumber yourself with fruitless pains to mend and remedy remote effects ; let the soul be erect, and all things will go well⁶. "

Emerson's doctrine, expressed in his own easily imitated style, has spread over and still has a firm hold in America. " There is a mysterious faith abroad in the land ", said P. E. More in 1906, " which however we grudge to say it, is the most serious manifestation of religion discoverable in these days. We call it Christian Science or faith healing, or what not — the gospel of a certain Mrs. Baker-Eddy, but in reality it does not owe its strength to the teaching of an ignorant woman in New Hampshire. It is a diluted and stale product of Emersonianism ". What was true in 1906 is still prevalent to-day. This form of popular metaphysics, intelligible to all because it borrows its similes from the most striking phenomena of nature, pleasing to all because of its belief in the perfectibility of man, has enjoyed unprecedented vogue, and can be found in the histrionic utterances of many present-day preachers and evangelists.

His peculiar type of popular metaphysics leans always towards

1. *Journals*. July, 1834.

2. *Works and Days*.

3. *Demonology*.

4. *The Preacher*.

5. *Demonology*.

6. *The Transcendentalist*.

the scientific or pseudo-scientific; and we know of course how weighty is the tone of all the similes that Emerson borrowed from the exact sciences of his day. "It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato and the preaching of the immortality of the soul. Yet all must come, as surely as the first atom has two sides¹." "The first quality we know in matter is centrality, — we call it gravity, — which holds the universe together... To this material essence answers Truth, in the intellectual world, — Truth, whose centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere²..." "While we speak the loadstone is withdrawn; down falls our filing in a heap with the rest, and we continue our mummery to the wretched shaving. Let us go for universals; for the magnetism, not for the needle³."

Out of this high frequency of metaphysical concepts grew what has been termed Emerson's transcendental language, a language, so oddly personal as to possess a hermetic significance, incomprehensible, some critics aver, to the average reader. As Emersonism represents the most palpable or external aspect of the author's style, so transcendentalism represents the forms into which his leading thoughts were cast. Naturally this study, dealing chiefly with style, does not penetrate to the core of transcendentalist, does not seek to trace its origin.

Emerson was not the founder of transcendentalism. "He was but one of many; others, — such as Channing, even before his day, — had taught the same facility of the spiritual life⁴." Even though some critics point out that Concord had become the citadel of the new truth, the headquarters of the forces of transcendentalism, even though Emerson contributed to the *Dial*, the literary organ of the movement, the first number of which appeared in 1840, yet he refused to be associated with the doctrine. "Emerson", it is stated, disclaimed allegiance to that philosophy. He called it the Saturnalia or excess of faith. "The terminology of the word "transcendentalism" in its philosophic sense goes back to Kant and the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Emerson knew Kant, Schelling, Fichte, it is true; but his *Journals* prove conclusively that the whole stamp of his life was taken before these sources were open to him. Yet it may be said that he partook of the movement in so far as it applied

1. *Nature*.

2. *Progress of Culture*.

3. *Nominalist and Realist*.

4. P. E. More, *Shelburne Essays*, p. 78.

to whatever in man's mental and spiritual nature is conceived as above experience and independent of it. He can be identified with it also in that Cabot terms it "an outburst of Romanticism on Puritan ground"; and this implies individualism breaking through spiritual rules, which was certainly true in Emerson case and is shown in his new metaphysical ideas.

What was then his own central concept? This, it is believed: creation is subservient to a spiritual force within us, which increases in proportion as it translates its God-like quality through the medium of Nature and forever moves onward and outward to new identities. *Circles*, *Compensation*, the *Over-Soul*, all hold the same idea of creation from a focal point, of incessant overflowing, of allowing currents to assume shape, even at the contact of obstacles, until finding a weak point they can break through to a further overflow. Nature and the Soul are to Emerson the constant if perpetually changing identity, the final terms of his system of thought. All the phrases, all the passages which stand as so many propositions of these premises, can be defined as expressions of his own transcendental language. Here are some of these expressions, in which the abstract and the concrete are often used as corresponding terms: "All multiplicity wishes to be resolved into unity"; "Knowledge is the Straight Line; Wisdom is the power of the Straight Line, or the Square; Virtue is the power of the Solid"; "There is one animal, one plant, one matter and one force. The laws of light and heat translate each other"; "Nothing but is beautiful in the whole. Learn the history of a cranberry. Mark the day when the pine cones and acorns fall"; "Small and mean things serve as well as great symbols. The meaner the type by which a law is expressed, the more pungent it is and the more lasting in the memory of men"; "I think that a man should compare advantageously with a river, with an oak, with a mountain, endless flow, expansion, and grit"; "Every man is bi-polar: never a circle"; "There is a great parallax in human nature ascertained by observing it from different states of mind"; "Is not the Vast an element in man? Yet what teaching or book of to-day appeals to the vast?"; "God's ways are parabolic projections that do not return into themselves"; "The universe is the externization of the Soul. Wherever the life is, that bursts into appearance and is".

This transcendental phraseology may not have been entirely original. In Nature, Emerson quotes from Plotinus: "Nature is but an image or imitation of wisdom, the last thing of the soul: Nature

being a thing which doth only do, but not know'... Build therefore your own world... a corresponding revolution in things will attend the influx of the Spirit."

Was this form of speech dominant in Emerson's works? A large part of his writings have little of transcendentalism. Yet he is recognized easily to-day under the label of The Transcendentalist, because of the wide popularity of his writing of that type, writing clothed in impressive obscurity and savouring of the oracular. Indeed transcendentalism, brushing aside mere experience, soon came to mean transcending common sense. So tortuous, cryptic, metaphorical, verbose, seemingly incoherent traits have in consequence been noted in that particular phase of Emerson's style whenever his longer passages have been studied with no reference to the whole. The impression is further increased by the quick, nervous tempo.

Condensed thoughts following each other in rapid succession, usually expressed in bold, symbolic imagery, often create in Emerson's style an effect of startling irrelevance. A second and even a third reading are necessary in order to dispel the resulting impression of incoherence :

Conversation is a game of circles. In conversation we pluck up the *termini* which bound the common of silence on every side. The parties are not to be judged by the spirit they partake and even express under this Pentecost. To-morrow they will have receded from this high-water mark. To-morrow you will find them stooping under the old pack-saddles. Yet let us enjoy the cloven flame whilst it glows on our walls.

When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker, to oppress us with the greatness and exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights to become men...

Good as is discourse, silence is better, and shames it. The length of the discourse indicates the distance of thought betwixt the speaker and the hearer. If they were at a perfect understanding in any part, no words would be necessary thereon. If at one in all parts, no words would be suffered¹.

Emerson's transcendental passages sometimes admit of well-organized development, even though obscurity is the general impression :

The key to every man is his thought. Sturdy and defying though he look, he has a helm which he obeys, which is the idea after which all his facts are classified. He can only be reformed by showing him a new

1. *Circles.*

idea which commands his own. The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to a new and larger circle and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force of truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance, — as, for instance, an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite, — to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify and hem in the life. But the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, which attempts to stop and to bind.

But the heart refuses to be imprisoned ; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions.

Every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series¹...

This obscurity may be explained also by the fact that the language of Emerson's philosophy is highly symbolical : " The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought... Man imprisoned, man crystallized, man vegetative, speak to man impersonated² " ; " To-day is a King in disguise³ " ; " The passion rebuilds the world for the youth... the trees of the forest have grown intelligent ; and he almost fears to trust them with the secret which they seem to invite⁴ " ; " The days come and go like muffled and veiled figures, sent from a distant and friendly party ; but they say nothing ; and if we do not use the gifts they bring, they carry them as silently away⁵ " ; and, of course, the famous " Hitch your wagon to a star⁶ ". Cryptic bizarre, wise, such he appears in his endless symbolism : " The world is a glass dictionary " ; " It is a great joy to get away from persons and live under the domination of the Multiplication Table " ; " I don't like linear but spherul people ; but discontent merely shows incompleteness as you measure yourself by time and events ; as soon as you express yourself, you will round ".

One may well submit the question : Was not Emerson's the first example of symbolism in America ? We know that Whitman was his disciple, that the latter has come to be regarded as the chief

1. *Circles.*

2. *Nature.*

3. *Nature.*

4. *Love.*

5. *Works and Days.*

6. *Society and Solitude. Civilization.*

American symbolist of the nineteenth century, and that "Emerson, in the heroic aspirations of his free thought, taught Whitman most of all".

We have seen that when Emerson began to write the language of metaphysics was really made of stereotyped commonplaces, and that he felt the need of a different phraseology. His new belief, which was a blend of religion and personal philosophy, motivated his innovation in speech. On the whole, his style remained profoundly religious. At times it acquired a Quaker-like quality marked by simplicity and power; and at times assumed the more ambitious aspect of a natural philosophy which, some critics claim, was destined to become the language of Christian Science. More generally, his style came to be designated as transcendental. It grew out of the author's system of intimate interrelation between the Soul, Nature, and the Deity; and it found its main expression in the constant spiritual affinities he sought to define. Obscurity is the chief reproach levelled at it, a reproach often justified. This type of writing gave rise to a mystical symbolism, which inspired Whitman. Since the latter is acknowledged as the first great American symbolist, it would seem to follow that transcendentalism contributed in the creation of a new form of literary expression on this continent.

1. Emory Holloway. *Whitman, an Interpretation in Narrative*, p. 18.

IX

THE ORATOR

The object of oratory being to convince by appealing to the emotions, requires on the part of the orator a corresponding emotional force as well as logic and technique. Emerson's career was one in which oratory played the principal part. It was his livelihood. The Church, then the lecture room and the itinerant touring of the country, addresses to various bodies learned and political, constitute his life work. His writings are products of this life. The *Journals* furnished material for his lectures, the *Essays* and other volumes, except *Nature*, were the final forms of his modified oral discourses.

The question may be pertinently asked, had he the desire for oratory, had he the gift. The *Journals* are instructive in this regard: "I inherit from my sire a formality of manners and speech but I derive from him or his patriotic parent a passionate love for the strains of eloquence. I burn after the *aliquid immensum infinitumque* which Cicero desired. What we ardently love, we learn to imitate¹". But as a preacher he found his limitations: "I should not be a bard of common life, wants, individualities in the pulpit, were I not the foolish parlor and table companion that I am²". As a lecturer he doubted his power of speech: "The labial speech, instead of the stomachic, afflicts me... Why has never the poorest country college offered me a professorship of rhetoric? I think I could have taught an orator, though I am none³". He had no mannerisms, no vocal devices, things which so often assist the orator. "His voice", one listener observed, "seemed to have no connection with the physical man⁴".

Was lecturing with Emerson a means of earning his living and

1. *Journals*. April, 1824.

2. *Journals*. March, 1862.

3. *Journals*. March, 1862.

4. Van Wyck Brooks. *Emerson and Others*, p. 83.

nothing more? It is true that for a well-informed, cultured man professional eloquence offered in his day some rather alluring possibilities. There was a public eager to be enlightened. Furthermore, eloquence was the literature of action of a young and vigorous nation, and it held sway. "The literary language of America", says Mencken, "was almost wholly polemical down to Jefferson's day."

Yet the Emersonian eloquence is not found chiefly in his lectures. His real oratorical talent is found in his written work, particularly in the emotional passages. A marked individualism, which may have proved a limitation to his ever becoming a popular orator, is evident in all his work: "Insist on yourself; never imitate¹". "I find nothing healthful or exalting in the smooth conventions of Society; I do not like the close air of saloons. I begin to suspect myself to be a prisoner, though heated with all this courtesy and luxury. I pay a destructive tax in my conformity²." "Remember that no society can ever be so large as one man³." "Leave this hypocritical prating about the manners. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to draw individuals out of them⁴."

From this individualism are derived quite a few characteristic qualities which serve to fan Emerson's eloquence, which he displayed in his written work. There is directness, forcefulness, courage, and pugnacity. "All eloquence is a war of posts", he states in his *Journals*; and in his address at Concord in April, 1867. "Every principle is a war-note." Eloquence usually assumes with him the form of righteous indignation. The *Journals*, wherein restraint is not indispensable, contain most of these outbursts — the expression of his outraged moral sense. Their very vehemence is proof of Emerson's sincerity:

"Language has lost its meaning in the universal cant. *Representative government* is really misrepresentative; union is a conspiracy against the Northern states which the Northern states are to have privilege of paying for; *the adding of Cuba and Central America* to the slave marts is the *enlarging of the area of freedom*. *Manifest destiny*, *democracy*, *freedom*, fine names for an ugly thing. They call it otto of rose and lavender. — I call it bilge water. They call it Chivalry and Freedom; I call it the stealing all the earning of a poor man and the earnings of a little

1. *Self-Reliance*.

2. *New England Reformers*.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Considerations by the Way*.

girl and boy, and the earnings of all that shall come from him, his children's children forever¹. »

« South Carolina has placed itself in a foolish position and we are willing she should. It is a jail, an Alsatia. Leave it to itself. It has excluded every gentleman, every man of honour, every man of humanity, every freeman from its territory. Is that a country in which I wish to walk where I am assured beforehand that I shall not meet a great man? that all the men are cotton gins? where a great man cannot live, where the people are degraded, for they go with padlocked lips, and with seared conscience?... We don't expect a sovereign state to treat us like a footpad. But South Carolina does so treat us. The doctrine of South Carolina proves too much.

« But new times have come, and new policy, subtler and nobler and more strong than any before. It is the inevitable effect of culture — it cannot be otherwise — to dissolve the animal ties of brute strength, to insulate, to make a country of men; not one strong officer, but a thousand strong men, ten thousand. In all South Carolina there is but one opinion, but one man — Mr. Calhoun. Its citizens are but little Calhouns.

« In Massachusetts there are many opinions, many men. It is coming, I hope, to a pass when there shall not be the *Atlas* and the *Post*, the *Daily Advertiser* and the *Courier*, but these shall lose their importance in a crowd of equal and happier men²... »

Seer, self-appointed prophet of a new faith, determined to instil into the hearts of his countrymen an ideal sorely needed in his age of gross materialism, he is often given to merciless flayings of the nation at large. This being the aim of his life, the natural outlet for his pent-up preaching proclivities, we should not wonder at the virulence of expression. Note in the following passage the intentional accumulation of epithets, of adjectives which, after all, are the overtones of oratorical emphasis :

Alas for America, as I must so often say, the ungirt, the diffuse, the profuse, procumbent — one wide ground juniper out of which no cedar, no oak will rear up a mast to the clouds! It all runs to leaves, to suckers, to tendrils, to miscellany. The air is loaded with poppy, with imbecility, with dispersion and sloth.

Eager, solicitous, hungry, rabid, busy-bodied America attempting and hastily accomplishing much; yes, catch thy breath and correct thyself, and failing here, prosper out there; speed and fever are never greatness; but reliance and serenity and waiting.

America is formless, has no terrible and no beautiful condensation. Genius always anthropomorphist, run every idea into a fable, constructs, finishes, as the plastic Italian cannot build a post or a pump-handle but it terminates in a human head³.

1. *Journals*. September, 1845.

2. *Journals*. March, 1847.

3. *Journals*. June, 1847.

But if he could preach culture to his country-men he could and would presume to bring it to England itself. No doubt aware that he had been dubbed "The savage from Massachusetts, that rather superior Londoners desired to listen to him, he must have felt that he was subtly challenged to show courage and called upon to dispel any suspicion of robust Yankee vulgarity. So he proceeded to speak his mind before his "distinguished audience", as he put it, taking as his topic "Natural Aristocracy"¹.

Prosy, lengthy, formal, guarded, he nevertheless received due praise for his provocative directness :

A soul so much more drawn to itself than to others that it comes through and out of any events or companies the same; like metals and the nobler chemical compounds whose particles have that strong affinity for each other that no solvent can be found.

These distinctions are in man, and as flagrant in democracies as in oligarchies.

Beauty no reasoning, no legislation, could impart. It will not only remain a potent, but a differencing and an aristocratic quality...

Nor will it be at all foreign to my purpose if it should appear that I am describing that which is the theoretic peerage, and not one recognized and actualized in any kingdom on earth. It would be ignoble, would it not? to draw our sketch from any body necessarily so impure as any that can contrive to exist amidst so much vice, injustice, and imbecility as we all confess in our times. I have no compliments to pay, and no tenderness to one or other renowned name, and really, therefore, no interest for their sake but is my own and all men's; none but a regard for the behoof of the race that there should be model men, that we should all have true pictures of such, and, if possible, living standards. I write of a nobility always existing, but its members so scattered, so heedless of badges, so rarely convened, so little in sympathy with any favorite measure that it is not acknowledged in any newspaper or in any peerage².

Emerson's speech on the Fugitive Slave Law has been termed "one of the most magnificent invectives in the English language"³. One can sense in the *Journals* the indignation stirring within him: "This filthy enactment was made in the nineteenth century, by people who read and write! I will not obey it, by God." An interesting parallel can be drawn between this address to the citizens of Concord in May, 1851, and the more formal lecture read in New York City on the same subject about three years later. In the first, Emerson trusts to his instincts: "Fellow citizens: I accepted your

1. The original lecture was lost, and extracts were arranged by Cabot.

2. The essay on Aristocracy enlarges on these views.

3. *Bliss Perry*. Emerson to-day, p. 108.

invitation to speak to you on the great question of these days, with very little consideration of what I might have to offer..." His indignation is thoroughly aroused: "We do not breathe well. There is infamy in the air." Moral values are upset, and shame follows: "Boston spoiled by prosperity must bow its ancient honor in the dust." He describes the panic that sweeps through all the classes and professions, and has scornful irony for them and for little men of the hour: "However close Mr Wolf's nails have been pared, however neatly he has been shaved and tailored, and set up on end, and taught to say, 'Virtue and Religion...'" He raises the tone in lofty denunciation: "I question the value of our civilization.. I cannot accept the railroad and telegraph in exchange for reason and for charity... What is the use of the courts... what is the use of a Federal Bench... the whole wealth and power of Boston — two hundred thousand souls, and eighty millions of money — are thrown into the scale of crime..." Then the pitch of his eloquence shifts. He appeals to reason against the iniquity of laws, proves they ought to be disobeyed, numbers five arguments and develops each one of them, quotes jurists, cites precedents. If reason will not suffice, he appeals to the heart against reason, and calls upon man's chief attribute, courage: "As long as men have bowels they will disobey." He builds up his attack, centers it on Webster, and begins by paying him homage: "Who has not helped to praise him? Simply he was the one eminent American of our time, whom we could produce as a finished work of Nature." But he weighs him and finds him wanting — brutally and vividly: "... he has no moral perception, no moral sentiment but in that region — to use the phrase of the phrenologists — a hole in the head..." He presses the second point: "What shall we do?" From then on the tempo accelerates. Eloquence becomes direct and demands action; as he advocates the buying and freeing of the slaves: ", Every man in the land will give a week's work to dig away this accursed mountain of sorrow once and forever out of the world." "Let us confront this mountain of poison, — bore, blast, excavate, pulverize and shovel it once for all, down into the bottomless pit. A thousand millions were cheap." Then comes the peroration. Emerson appeals to his immediate hearers, to their pride. Let Massachusetts lead and let her glory be theirs. It can be done: "Greece was the least part of Europe. Attica a little part of that, — one-tenth of the size of Massachusetts. Yet that district still rules the intellect of men... Massachusetts is little, but if true

to itself, can be the brain which turns about the behemoth... ”

By contrast, the New York lecture is obviously “ written ”. It begins with generalities in which Emerson indicates that he is chiefly interested in scholars. “ What I have to say is to them. ” Forced imagery takes the place of vehemence : “ Look into the morning trains... the newsboy, that humble priest of politics, finance, philosophy and religion... upholds this magical sheet, — two pence a head his bread of knowledge costs, — and instantly the entire rectangular assembly, fresh from their breakfast, are bending as one man to their real breakfast. ” Having touched upon slavery, he passes on to Webster, the object of the main part of his discourse, and praises him as before : “ I remember his appearance at Bunker Hill. There was the monument, and here was Webster... ” The eulogy persists. The attack, when it comes, has lost its vehemence. Compare the powerful denunciation of “... he has no moral perception, no moral sentiment ”, with this mild impeachment : “... he wanted that deep source of inspiration. Hence a sterility of thought, the want of generalization in his speeches. ” Then Emerson gives an analysis of these speeches and points out their deficiency in oratorical value. Webster being duly dismissed, Emerson launches into his favorite disquisition about abstract concepts, — virtue, liberty, duty, freedom ; and thence to considerations on conservatism and the Whigs and on the Constitution. Only here and there an occasional flare up brings out the true feeling of the orator : “ For one would have said that a Christian would not keep slaves, — but the Christians keep slaves. Of course they will not dare to read the Bible? Won’t they? They quote the Bible, quote Paul, quote Christ, to justify slavery... ” The academic style of the *Essays* reasserts itself. The Persian Saadi is quoted, foreign politics are brought in. So is Hobbes, and many others ; and the lecture, feeble, spineless and shapeless, ends *ex abrupto* : “ I hope we have reached the end of our unbelief, have come to a belief, that there is a Divine Providence in the world, which will not save us but through our co-operation. ”

When dealing with a mixed audience, Emerson hugs facts, brings in the concrete, however trivial, provided it is forcible. The following extract from the *Journals* is the first draft of an address he delivered during the Civil War, when feelings were at a fever heat :

When we build our first care is to find good foundation. If the surface be loose, or sandy, or springy, we clear it away, and dig down to the hard pan, or better, to the living rock, and bed our courses in that. So

will we do with the State. The war is serving many good purposes. It is no respecter of respectable persons or of worn-out party platforms. War is a realist, shatters everything flimsy and shifty, sets aside all false issues, and breaks through all that is not real as itself; comes to organize opinions and parties, resting on the necessity of man; like its own cannonade, comes crushing in through party walls that have stood fifty or sixty years as if they were solid. The screaming of leaders, the votes by acclamation, conventions, are all idle wind. They cry for mercy, but they cry to one who never knew the word. He is the arm of the Fates, and, as has been said, " Nothing prevails against God but God " Everything must perish except that which must live...

I speak the speech of an idealist. I say let the rule be right. If the theory is right, it is not so much matter about the facts. If the plan of your fort be right, it is not so much matter that you have got a rotten beam or a cracked gun somewhere; they can by and by be replaced by better without tearing your fort to pieces. But if the plan is wrong, then all is rotten, and every step adds to the ruin; every screw is loose, and all the machinery is crazy. The question stands thus. Reconstruction now is no longer matter of doubt...

Then how to reconstruct. I say, this time go to work right. Go down to the pan. See that your work turns on a jewel. Do not make an impossible mixture. Do not lay your corner-stone on a shaking morass that will let down the superstructure into a bottomless pit again...

And I, speaking in the interest of no man and no party, but simply as a geometer of his forces, say that the smallest beginning, so that it is just, is better and stronger than the largest that is not quite just...

Dignity is highly consistent with oratory. Addressing his fellow townsmen at Concord in 1835 on the subject of their independence, Emerson gives a good model of nobility and pathos, well calculated to reach the hearts of the descendants of those men who fought in the Revolutionary War :

Fellow citizens : Let not the solemn shadows of two hundred years, this day, fall over us in vain. I feel some unwillingness to quit the remembrance of the past. With all the hope of the new I feel that we are leaving the old. Every moment carries us farther from the epochs of public principle, the Planting, and the Revolution of the colony. Fortunate and favored this town has been, in having received so large an infusion of the spirit of both of those periods. Humble as is our village in the circle of later and prouder towns that whiten the land, it has been consecrated by the presence and activity of the purest men... The benediction of their prayers and of their principles lingers around us. The acknowledgement of the supreme being exalts the history of this people. It brought the fathers hither. In a war of principle, it delivered their sons. And so long as a spark of this faith survives among the children's children, so long shall the name of Concord be honest and venerable...

There are people who can hardly read the names on yonder bronze tablet, the mist so gathers in their eyes. Three of the names of sons of one family. A gloom gathers on this assembly, composed as it is of kindred men and women, for, in many houses, the dearest and noblest is gone from their hearthstone. Yet it is tinged with light from heaven. A duty so severe has been discharged, and with such immense results of good, lifting private sacrifice to the sublime, that, though the canon volleys have a sound of funeral echoes, they can yet hear through them the benedictions of their country and mankind.

It is well indeed to contrast this simple, moving eloquence of the patriot Emerson at Concord with almost any political lip homage to the democracy of to-day.

Emerson, we have seen, had a longing for oratory, although no great trust in his own gift. Eloquence was his professional implement, and the practice of it was forced upon him by the literary fashion of his day. He often found lecturing irksome, an imposed task. From his intense individualism came most of the characteristic virtues of his oratorical style : forcefulness, courage, pugnacity.

In the *Journals* his vehemence, provoked by righteous indignation, breaks out without restraint. His aggressiveness is more guarded elsewhere. The addresses are in this respect striking. The whole gamut of eloquent improvisation is evidenced in his notable speech on the Fugitive Slave Law : anger, shame, abuse, expository presentation, logical argumentation, pictorial vividness intended to strike the imagination, exhortations to action, appeals to the nobler impulses of man. The lecture on the same subject loses appeal and vitality because it is prepared and formalized.

One finds in Emerson's addresses a tone of nobility and pathos that betoken sincerity. Emerson, the orator, was at his best when he gave heed to his feelings, at his worst when intellectually conscious. His peers, however, deemed quite highly his power of studied eloquence, and commended in it the unexpected turn of his original mind : " We admire ", said A. Bronson Alcott, " the stately sense, the splendor of diction, and we are surprised as we listen. Even his hesitancy between the delivery of his periods, his perilous passages from paragraph to paragraph of manuscript, we have almost learned to like, as if he were but sorting his Keys meanwhile for opening his cabinets... and we wait willingly till his gem is out glittering. "

THE ESSAYIST PROPER

Emerson's chief claim to fame lies in the *Essays*. This kind of writing, as evidenced in the works of Montaigne, Bacon, and Charles Lamb, is usually highly introspective. Not so in the Essays of Emerson. Although he has, in common with the above named essayists, a wide range of topics, the moral tone predominates, as does the constant metaphysical inquiry. In this respect he displays more unity than the others. Comparisons would therefore be invidious, since Emerson sought his inspiration in the moral and metaphysical. It is therefore difficult to classify him, as "his soul was like a star and dwelt apart". As Holmes said, "His gift was insight".

What proportion of objective, discursive reasoning can one find in the *Essays*? Not much at a stretch, for his feelings usually run high. Yet some passages are of that type. In *Politics* he writes with more objectivity than is customary with him. Coming as it does after the highly metaphysical *Nature*, this essay produces on the reader the impression that the author, having found his stride, achieves at last the intelligible without falling into the platitudinous. We have page after page of exposition in solid thoughts, expressed with forcible and logical sequence; a lucid disquisition on the spirit and essence of democracy, its merits and shortcomings. But suddenly, as a reported image strikes his fancy, further comparisons suggest themselves to the author, who is carried into his familiar sphere of imponderables, where clarity no longer prevails. We, perforce, must follow him into the realm of his Utopia.

Citizens of feudal states are alarmed at our democratic institutions lapsing into anarchy, and the older and more cautious among ourselves are learning from Europeans to look with some terror at our turbulent freedom. It is said that in our licence of constructing the Constitution, and in the despotism of public opinion, we have no anchor; and one

foreign observer thinks that he has found the safeguard in the sanctity of Marriage among us; and another thinks that he has found it in our Calvinism. Fisher Ames expressed the popular security more wisely, when he compared a monarchy and a republic, saying that a monarchy is a merchantman, which sails well, but will sometimes strike on a rock and go to the bottom; whilst a republic is a raft, which would never sink, but then your feet are always in water. No forms can have any dangerous importance whilst we are befriended by the laws of things. It makes no difference how many tons weight of atmosphere presses on our heads, so long as the same pressure resists it within the lungs. Augment the mass a thousand fold, it cannot begin to crush us, as long as the same pressure resists it within the lungs. Augment the mass a thousand fold, it cannot begin to crush us, as long as reaction is equal to action. The fact of two poles, of two forces, centripetal and centrifugal, is universal, and each force by its own activity develops the other. Wild liberty develops iron conscience. Want of liberty, by strengthening law and decorum, stupifies conscience. 'Lynch law' prevails only where there is greater hardihood and self-subsistency in the leaders. A mob cannot be a permanency; everybody's interest requires that it should not exist, and only justice satisfies all. We must trust infinitely to the beneficent necessity which shines through all laws...

Every man finds a sanction for his simplest claims and deeds, in decisions of his own mind, which he calls Truth and Holiness...

The idea after which each community is aiming to make and mend its laws, is the will of the wise man. The wise man it cannot find in nature, and it makes awkward but earnest efforts to secure his government by contrivance; as by causing the entire people to give their voices on every measure...

All forms of government symbolize an immortal government, common to all dynasties and independent of numbers, perfect where two men exist, perfect where there is only one man...

To educate the wise man the State exists, and with the appearance of the wise man the State expires. The appearance of character makes the State unnecessary. The wise man is the State. He needs no army, fort, or navy, — he loves men too well; no bribe, or feast, or palace, to draw friends to him; no vantage ground, no favorable circumstance. He needs no library, for he has not done thinking; no church for he is a prophet; no statute book, for he has the lawgiver; no money, for he is the value; no road, for he is at home where he is; no experience, for the life of the creator shoots through him, and looks from his eyes. He has no personal friends, for he who has the spell to draw the prayer and piety of all men unto him needs not husband and educate a few to share with him a select and poetic life. His relation to men is angelic; his memory is myrrh to them; his presence, frankincense and flowers...

Even had he wished it, it was not possible for Emerson to remain dispassionate and purely objective. Mr. P. E. More remarks that "his essays ripple and recoil on the surface, but underneath there

is a current setting steadily to one point". This point represents his whole system of philosophy which he endeavors consciously or otherwise to incorporate into each and every one of his essays. Leaving out such of them as *Self-Reliance*, *Compensation*, *Spiritual Laws*, the *Over-Soul*, which are replete with his philosophical beliefs, we may take the first three essays of the more general type in his first series, and find therein references to Emerson's four main theories: 1° The infinitude of the private man; 2° Polarity, or action and reaction, subtle relationships; 3° God in Nature; 4° All things are moral. In *History*, we find 1° "There is one mind common to all individual men"; 2° "There is a relation between the hours of life and the centuries of time"; 3° "Praise is looked, homage tendered, love flows from mute nature, from the mountains and the lights of the firmament"; 4° "The world exists for the education of each man". In *Love*, there is the same close adhesion to his four main theories: 1° "Man does not longer appertain to his family; he is somewhat; he is a person; he is a soul"; 2° "In the actual world... dwell care and canker and fear. With thought, with the ideal, is immortal hilarity, the rose of joy"; 3° "The lover ascends to the highest beauty, to knowledge of the Divinity..."; 4° "Everything is beautiful seen from the point of the intellect or as truth". In *Friendship*, we find the same insistence on Emerson's four main theories: 1° "The soul environs itself with friends that it may enter into a greater self acquaintance or solitude"; 2° "The law of nature is alternation for evermore"; 3° "True love transcends the unworthy object and dwells and broods on the eternal..."; 4° "In the last analysis love is only the reflection of a man's own worthiness from other men". The effect produced by this peculiarly diffused focus is at once one of dispersion in the particular, for the pattern of related or cognate thoughts is broken; and one of cohesion in the whole.

One may enquire as to the qualities habitually expected of essays as a literary genre, and then attempt to discover whether Emerson's conform to the norm. In the first place, an essay should have a moral tone. It should therefore be couched in dignified style, and should possess a note of exhortation, since it aims at moral suasion. It should also adhere to the rules of sustained writing, for it is intended for the scholar, for the man of culture. Lying midway between the oratorical and the purely literary, it should progress towards an emotional climax on the one hand, and on the other observe the laws of logical sequence and artistic development. In

the following extract from the essay on *Self-Reliance*, we note all of these characteristics :

I read the other day some verses written by an eminent painter which were original and not conventional. The soul always hears an admonition in such lines, let the subject be what it may. The sentiment they instill is of more value than any thought they may contain. To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the immost in due time becomes the outmost — and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and tradition, and spoke not what men but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts : they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humoured inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.

In this opening paragraph Emerson sets out to convince us that we must be cognizant of our latent gifts for creative power. In its final phrase he upbraids us for our apathy. In the second paragraph of the same essay, beginning thus, "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance", he labours the point of our deplorable helplessness. The third paragraph, with a clarion note, proclaims the truth we want to hear : "Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string."

In Emerson's, essays, the leading thought appears early, usually expressed with such force and finality that however digressive, disconnected or even incoherent the whole may appear, the point is made and the lesson learned. Lack of coordination in such an essay as *Self-Reliance* is, in our opinion, not a major fault. Prepared by the idea contained in the last sentence of the preceding paragraph, each new paragraph is marshalled in by an assertion frequently strong enough on being isolated to become a saying or a proverb : "The nonchalance of boys who are sure of a dinner"; "Whoso would be a man must be a non-conformist"; "Virtues are, in the popular estimate, rather the exception than the rule";

"What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think"; "The objection to conforming to usages that have become dead to you is, that it scatters your force"; "For non-conformity the world whips you with displeasure"; "The other terror that scares us from self-trust is our consistency"; "But why should you keep your head over your shoulder. Why drag about this corpse of your memory?"; "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds."

Emerson, the essayist, is not the dispassionate writer, but rather the colorful artist who delights in striking images. That he was a born preacher, no matter the subject on hand and no matter the type of audience addressed, is to some extent demonstrated by his habitual recourse to the two mediums of expression generally adopted by exponents of popular ethics: terse, striking sayings; and picturesque imagery. One of his key essays, *The Over-Soul*, can be summarized by means of such expressions taken from the text:

There is a difference between one and another hour of life... Our faith comes in brief moments; our vice is habitual... The philosophy of six thousand years has not seared the chambers and magazines of the soul... Man is a stream whose source is hidden... I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine... When I watch that flowing river, which, out of regions I see not, pours for a season its streams into me, I see that I am a prisoner... The supreme Critic... the only prophet... is that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other... We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meanwhile within man is the soul of the whole... We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole of which these are the shining parts, is the soul... A man is a facade of a temple wherein all good abide. What we commonly call man, the eating, drinking, planting, counting man, does not, as we know him, represent himself, but misrepresents himself... The soul circumscribes all things... it contradicts all experience. In like manner it abolishes time and space. The influence of the senses, has, in most men, overpowered the mind to that degree, that the walls of time and space have come to look real and unsurmountable... We are often made to feel that there is another youth and age than that which is measured from the year of our natural birth. Some thoughts always find us young, and keep us so... And so, always, the soul's scale is one; the scale of the senses and the understanding is another... The growths of genius are of a certain *total* character... With each divine impulse the mind rends the thin rind of the visible and finite, and comes out into eternity, and inspires and expires its air... Man descends to meet... The soul is the perceiver and the revealer of truth... We are wiser than we know... We distinguish the

announcement of the soul, its manifestations of its own nature, by the term *Revelation*. These are always attended by the emotions of the sublime. For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. It is an ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing surges of the sea of life... Revelation is the disclosure of the soul... the understanding... undertakes to tell from God how long men shall exist, what their hands shall do, and what shall be their company, adding names, and dates, and places. But we must pick no locks.

One may wonder whether the essay as a genre was not the most suitable form of expression as well as the measure of Emerson's own particular talent. "The Essay is the most adequate verbal incarnation of Emerson's soul", affirms D. J. Snyder in his biography of Emerson.

Another requisite of essay writing is condensation, and it is popularly considered its *sine qua non*. Often educated people take away with them on a journey a single book — a collection of essays or even a collection of disconnected thoughts, because this type of literature, replete with condensed thoughts, is more conducive to real thinking than others of greater length. One has only to glance over the pages of Emerson's *Essays* to find hundreds of such thoughts, each capable of chapter-long development. The potentiality of the following, culled from his *Essays*, is obvious :

The power of love, as the basis of a State, has never been tried¹.

I count him a great man who inhabits a higher sphere of thought, into which other men rise with labour and difficulty².

He is great who is what he is from nature, and who never reminds us of others².

Blame is safer than praise³.

In general, every evil to which we do not succumb is a benefactor³.

We talk of choosing our friends, but friends are self-elected⁴.

It is foolish to be afraid of making our ties too spiritual, as if so we could lose any genuine love⁴.

A foreign greatness is the antidote for cabalism⁵.

Men resemble their contemporaries, even more than their progenitors⁵.

We animate what we can; and we see only what we animate.

The essay, not unlike the sonnet in this respect, must and can be judged on artistic proportions and form. It must be admitted that

1. *Politics*.

2. *Representative Men*.

3. *Compensation*.

4. *Friendship*.

5. *The Poet*.

the essays of Emerson fall short of standards on the first count. Distinctions should be drawn as to the second. It has been stated that Emerson's prose is more poetical than his verse. It is true that his prose can be judged to some degree by standards of poetic observance. It possesses the oral rhythm that can be made to serve faithfully his usually impassioned utterances; and of course the fact that it is not trammelled by rigid patterns of speech helps it further to express his hortative thoughts. Emerson says in his *Journals*, "I think now that the very finest and sweetest closes and falls are not in our meters, but in the measure of eloquence which have greater variety and richness than verse". There is a type of prose which has throbbing beat pulsating naturally from its very subject matter; and Emerson's writings abound in such prose:

Thou true land-lord! Sea-lord! Air-lord! Wherever snow falls or water flows or birds fly, wherever day and night meet in twilight, wherever the blue heaven is hung by clouds or sown with stars, wherever are forms with transparent boundarie, wherever are outlets into celestial space, wherever is danger, and awe, and love, — there is Beauty, plenteous as rain, shed for thee, and though thou shouldst walk the world over, thou shall not be able to find a condition inopportune or ignoble¹.

Spiritual exaltation suggests to him vivid conceptions of beauty; and often, beginning sedately, he rises to splendid heights:

To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society. I am not solitary whilst I read and write, though nobody is with me. But if a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which has been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.

Emerson's felicitous incursions into the realms of poetic prose are in most instances utterly spontaneous. Only occasionally their length and import suggest a deliberate endeavor, and in such passages he also commands our admiration:

O poet! a new nobility is conferred in groves and pastures, and not in castles or by the sword-blade any longer. The conditions are hard, but

1. *The Poet*.

equal. Thou shalt leave the world, and know the muse only... For the time of towns is tolled from the world by funereal chimes, but in nature the universal hours are counted by succeeding tribes of animals and plants, and by growth of joy on joy... The world is full of renunciations and apprentices, and this is thine; thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season. This is the screen and sheath in which Pan has protected his well-beloved flower, and thou shalt be known only to thine own, and they shall console thee with tenderest love. And thou shalt not be able to rehearse the names of thy friends in thy verse, for an old shame before the holy ideal. And this is the reward; that the ideal shall be real to thee, and the impressions of the actual world shall fall like summer rain, copious, but not troublesome to thy invulnerable essence. Thou shalt have the whole land for thy park and manor, the sea for thy bath and navigation, without tax and without envy; the woods and the rivers thou shalt possess that wherein others are only tenants and boarders.

It is interesting to compare this passage with the original passage in Emerson's journal of May 25, 1843, which he deleted and rendered more austere before he incorporated it into his essay on *The Poet*. One feels that Emerson made a conscious effort to curb an exultant sense of the loveliness of nature, that he wanted to intellectualize the passage, that he put more deliberate insistence on moral values when he took over the passage from the *Journal* to his essay. We feel disappointed, even, that he permitted intellectual and ethical preoccupations to dilute the lyrical qualities to which he gave free rein in his journal:

O Poet! by rock and bird is conferred a new nobility, and not in palaces any longer. Would you know the conditions, hard but equal? Thou shalt leave the world and know the muse only... For the time of towns is measured by funereal chimes, and every hour is tolled away from the world, but in Nature the merry hours are dialled by flowers on the hillside and growth of joy on joy. Thou shalt have a new census and calendar; for a long September day between sun and sun shall hold centuries in its rosy and yellow deeps, and thy calendar shall be thoughts and thy action 'As thou ought'. God wills also that thou abdicate a manifold and duplex life... And a tomb is all that shall be denied thee. For the Universe is thy house to live in and thou shalt not die... And thou shalt serve the God Terminus, the bounding Intellect, and love Boundary and Form, believing that Form is an oracle which never lies... And every man shall be to thee for all men, each man being alone in the vast Desert; and thou shalt worship him for he is the Universe in a mask.

Continually, beneath the mask of Emerson's prose, appears the *afflatus*, the divine frenzy of the poetic mind. The following passages are offered — the first as an example of Emerson's rhythmic

power in prose when that power is at its best; the second when that power is most deficient :

The hopes of the commoners take the same direction with the interest of the patricians. Every man who becomes rich buys land and does what he can to fortify the nobility, into which he hopes to rise. The Anglican clergy are identified with the aristocracy. Time and law have made the joinings and mouldings perfect in every part. The cathedrals, the universities, the national music, the popular romances, conspire to uphold the heraldry which the current politics of the day are sapping. The taste of the people is conservative. They are proud of the castles, and of the language and symbol of chivalry. Even the word ' lord ' is the luckiest style that is used in any language to designate a patrician. The superior education and manners of the nobles recommend them to the country¹.

The first and last lesson of the useful arts is that Nature tyrannizes over our works. They must be conformed to her law, or they will be ground to powder by her omnipresent activity. Nothing droll, nothing whimsical will endure. Nature is ever interfering with Art. You cannot build your house or pagoda as you will, but as you must. There is a quick bound set to your caprice. The leaning tower can only lean so far. The veranda or pagoda can curve upward only to a certain point. The slope of your roof is determined by the weight of snow².

In the first passage the movement is a surge forward, like so many equal and regular wavelets, until, as with the sea, one stronger periodic wave breaks and spreads out smoothly afar. The second passage, on the contrary, may be likened to a jumble of struggling, jerky sounds, an eddying of heterogenous notes and images. There is more of the latter type of passage in the Emersonian prose, due perhaps to his lack of continuity and his sometimes disconcerting condensation.

Surveying what has been said concerning the achievement of Emerson as an essayist, we note that in this realm a definite classification is difficult because of his extremely individual treatment of the subject matter. He is objective and discursive only occasionally. The fact that he continually reverted to a few favorite themes creates a mixed impression of unity and dispersion. His essays do conform to the recognized canons of the genre : moral tone, condensation, and at times artistic finish. His prose often has an undeniable poetic quality and rhythmic force. The fact that his writings contain

1. *English Traits*.

2. *Art*.

a high proportion of metaphysics detract from their literary quality. The style of the essayist, which is desultory and sophisticated, and that of the philosopher, which is intense and exhaustive, are both found in Emerson; and the possibility of a perfect blending of the two styles is problematic.

VI

INFLUENCE AND SUCCESS

To endeavor to estimate the contribution of an author merely through the medium of his style may seem unwarranted. Yet if style be regarded as the art of writing, as the most felicitous way the author has of conveying his messages to his readers, such an estimate may be of value.

It may be ventured even that, inasmuch as "only the works that are best written do survive", people can often identify a writer by his "manner" long after memories of the content of his works have vanished. Truly little appeal would Voltaire's ideas hold for the average reader of our day if his incisive, epigrammatic form did not constantly renew their actuality. And so with Emerson. His sentences still arrest, for the style of his challenging personality has not materially aged.

His art then will be the measure of his success, not his wisdom nor his philosophy, which critics can easily enough assail. "We are all wise. The difference between persons is not in wisdom but in art", says Emerson in his essay on *Intellect*.

Among intellectuals there is no doubt that his language continues to prove acceptable currency. Manuals of American literature are found sadly lacking if they do not offer selections of his prose style. One may not go as far as Clarence Stedman in declaring that Emerson and Longfellow "are of the very few whom we recognize as the true founders of American literature", yet it may be said to our author's credit that he is regarded by many as a most worthy exponent of good American language, and as a notable artisan of American culture.

A long line of literary men have come under Emerson's influence, — and not so much under that of his philosophic beliefs as under that of his forceful style... Thoreau was his most brilliant apprentice, although some think that the apprentice eventually outstripped

his master. Sherman mentions Professor Irving Babbitt as " an important continuation of the Emersonian influence in our times¹. " The same critic asserts that " whatever is finely academic, high-bred and distinguished in our critical literature today has felt the influence of Emerson and Lowell. "

The restraint of Emerson's academic style, as it served as model to literary writers of America, can be defined as moral tone. There is his very definite influence, one particularly valuable in an age of growing brutality : " There is no man living to whom, as a writer, so many of us feel and thankfully acknowledge so great an indebtedness for ennobling impulses ", said Lowell. This elevating tone of Emerson perhaps explains why modern preachers and moralists are continuing to quote him so freely. He provides a religious phraseology which is, however, free from sectarian bias. The Emersonian tone is distinctly noticeable in the widely read essays of Dr. Fosdick, one of the most popular liberal preachers of the United States at the present time. " To me ", said Theodore Parker, " the effect of Emerson's writings is profoundly religious... I know no living writer in any language who exercises so powerful a religious influence as he. " M. Dugard, in his book on Emerson, affirms : " Il a changé ce que l'on appelle aujourd'hui l'échelle des valeurs. " His style then is that of idealism ; and one will grant there is place in any literature for such a form of expression.

Naturally the *Essays* constitute a type of writing deserving of praise. Whatever their shortcomings, they have become classics. They should be studied as fine examples of a genre which denotes a decided advance in the intellectual maturity of a nation.

The expression of Emerson's transcendentalism does not remain confined to the limited class of scholars. It extends further afield, for it merges into the very process of thinking of many people. Indeed with American authors clarity of expression is of less importance than the power of creating a mood in the reader ; their literature very often does not make one see more clearly, but it makes the reader respond to the emotional states of the author. In French writers, on the contrary, clearness of expression predominates because it is insisted upon and expected by the public. And so the obscurity of this division of Emerson's writing not only found an uncritical public ; it also set an example of a type of writing which has been followed down to the present day.

1. Stuart P. Sherman. *Americans*, p. 86.

Emerson reaches out toward the nation at large, because he is devoid of artificiality : " His style is American and beats with the pulse of the climate. He is the only writer we have had who writes as he speaks, who makes no literary parade, has no pretensions of any sort... It is impossible to name his style without naming his character : they are one thing... Open his works at a hazard. You hear a man talking¹ ". " Carlyle [en dépit de ses objections le bénissait en lisant ses discours, la seule voix parfaitement *humaine* qui le réconfortât². "

To-day, through the pulpit, the press, clubs and political rostrum, Emersonism mingles with contemporary vernacular. Its success is born out of the facility with which it can be assimilated : " Emerson owes much... to his quotability, or the power with which his thought in its best and most condensed expression sinks into the mind and haunts the memory³. "

Finally, his style possesses to a remarkable degree characteristics invariably associated with the language of the man on the street, whether at play or at work — the affirmative, forceful style of expression that is typically American. One has not far to seek, in American literature, proofs of the dynamic optimism that Emerson has infused into it. His was essentially the language of practical idealism, and it has become infectious. " 'Hitch your wagon to a star' could become a principle of action ", affirms W. F. Dana⁴. As a matter of fact, it has become so on this continent. Emerson " ... 'sold' the idea of the inner life of man to certain classes of the American people. But this he did more by poetizing it than by rationalizing it⁵". It was chiefly through his style that he was able to achieve this end.

1. John Jay Chapman. *Emerson and other Essays*, pp. 30-32.

2. M. Dugard. R. W. *Emerson, sa vie, son œuvre*, p. 413.

3. G. E. Woodberry. R. W. *Emerson*, p. 158.

4. *The Optimism of R. W. Emerson*, p. 59.

5. Emory Holloway. *Whitman, an Interpretation in Narrative*, p. 402.

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